South Haven Tribune
$3
February 15, 2026

# SH Twp. gets updates on housing projects

### Lighthouse Ridge Apartments to use state tax credit, loan

**By JULIE NEWELL**
SH Tribune Editor

SOUTH HAVEN — The South Haven Township board received updates this week on two affordable housing projects that are currently in the works.

Senior Development Manager Graham Welling from Wallick Communities made a presentation to the board Wednesday night on the Lighthouse Ridge Apartments project.

The board previously approved a 4 percent payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) program for the project.

The project will include 52 units in three residential buildings and a community building. There will be a mix of two- and three-bedroom apartments, which will aim to cover up to 80 percent of the area median income.

"The site plan, those plans have been developed (and) we're nearly ready to submit those for building permits," Welling said.

The project is estimated to cost $16.2 million.

Welling said part of the funding will come from the low income housing and tax credit they were awarded in July 2025. The funding will also come from a permanent loan, grants and subordinate or source loans.

Welling said they had planned to go to the Federal Home Loan Bank in Indianapolis, Ind., however they were unable to submit their application in June due to the state tax credit not being awarded until July, which needed to be included in the application.

They were not awarded a $1 million grant that was going to round out the capital staff project.

The project has a deadline of two years with the tax credit program and everything has to be done, built and have some units occupied by the end of 2027.

In order to stay on track and cover the $1 million needed, Welling said they are exploring a few options including: having both a PILOT and a tax increment financing program (TIF) which has not been done for low income housing before, doing just a TIF program or lowering the current PILOT from 4 percent to 1 percent.

Board member Ross Stein said they would have to discuss the options before bringing it back to the board for approval.

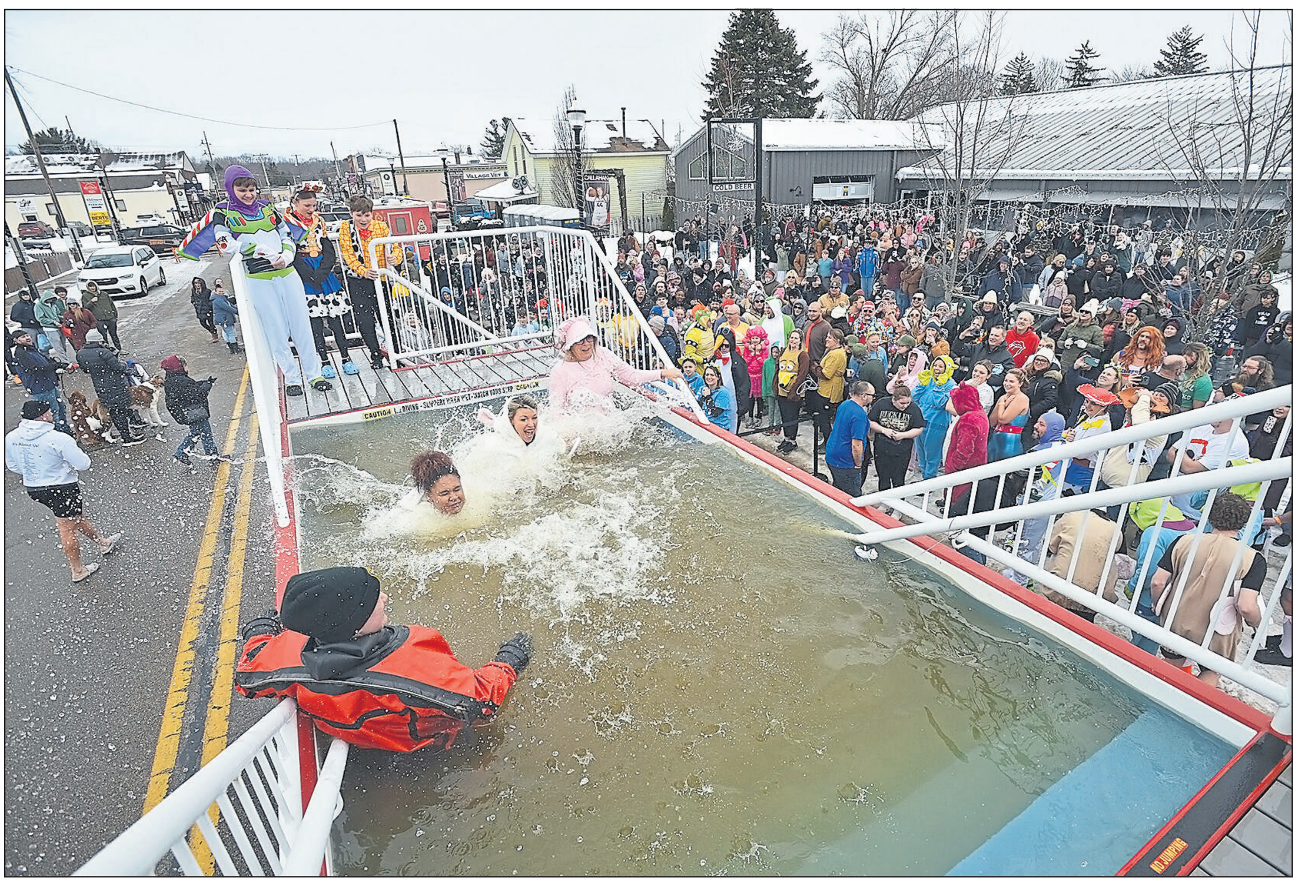
Later in the meeting, the board adopted an ordinance for the rezoning of the Lighthouse Ridge Apartments project. The property was rezoned from the medium density residential district to the multiple family residential district.

## Senior housing

Diane Rigozzi, executive director of Senior Services of Van Buren County, gave an update on the senior housing project during Wednesday's meeting.

"MSHDA (Michigan State Housing Development

See **HOUSING**, page A2



Photos by Don Campbell / Paxton Media Group

Hundreds gather Saturday at Watermark Brewing Co. in downtown Stevensville, for the 2026 Polar Plunge benefiting Special Olympics Michigan. About $117,000 were raised at the event.

# Taking the plunge

### Polar Plunge raises $117K in downtown Stevensville

**By TONY WITTKOWSKI**
Paxton Media Group

STEVENSVILLE — From its early days inside an Edwardsburg gym to an above ground swimming pool in a beer garden, the Polar Plunge has taken on a life of its own in Southwest Michigan.

Over the weekend, the annual philanthropic event drew hundreds of individuals to Watermark Brewing Co. in downtown Stevensville, and raised about $117,000 for Special Olympics Michigan – matching the mark that was raised last year. Saturday also marked the seventh time the brewery hosted the Polar Plunge that represents Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties.

Chris Mason, co-owner of Watermark, recalled how the event has grown over the years.

"Before coming to Stevensville, it was actually in a gymnasium in a high school or middle school, and they were generating about $7,000 in fundraising," Mason said. "Special Olympics Michigan came to us and asked to help grow this event."

Teams take their turn Saturday at Watermark Brewing Co., in downtown Stevensville, during the 2026 Polar Plunge benefiting Special Olympics Michigan.

In that initial year, this area's Polar Plunge raised $25,000. From then on, the funding and awareness began to snowball.

Mason said crews were using snowblowers throughout the past week to carve some paths in the beer garden in anticipation of the event.

With the approval of a social district by the Stevensville Village Council, Saturday's event kicked off with a drone flying in to deliver an opening-ceremony beer.

Several teams went with matching costumes that helped them stand out among other plungers. Berrien RESA, which raised the most out of the participants, had employees dressed as characters from "Toy Story."

The Berrien County Sheriff's Department went with a Super Mario Brothers theme for their costumes.

Sheriff Chuck Heit dressed as Bowser, which he said his granddaughter picked for him.

Heit and other deputies have been taking part in the

See **PLUNGE**, page A2

# Whitmer signs school cellphone ban

### Schools must ban phones during instructional time, but can be even more restrictive

**By CRAIG MAUGER**
The Detroit News (TNS)

LANSING — Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer vowed Tuesday that a new state policy to ban students from using cellphones in schools during instructional time will help improve their social skills and their ability to learn.

Whitmer, a Democrat, signed two bills on the subject into law during an event inside Waverly High School, three miles from the state Capitol.

"Will this new law work? Hell yes, it will," Whitmer said. "I know I'm in school. I shouldn't be swearing."

Whitmer, lawmakers and educators spoke out in support of the cellphone ban on Tuesday, while standing in a hallway in front of a row of blue lockers and signs that said "supporting MI students."

The governor called for the cellphone restriction during her 2025 State of the State address. A bipartisan coalition of Sen. Dayna Polehanki, D-Livonia, and Rep. Mark Tisdel, R-Rochester Hills, helped negotiate a compromise and usher it through the divided Legislature, where bipartisan achievements have been few over the last year.

Under the new law, school districts will have to create their own policies by next school year that, at a minimum, prohibit cellphones from being used during instructional time.

The districts could also act earlier or go further to completely outlaw phones and other devices on campus, but the decision on whether to exceed the new minimum standard would be up to local officials.

Tisdel has previously estimated that 40 of the more than 500 school districts in Michigan already have cellphone policies that are enforced. But the landscape of rules is a patchwork in Michigan, and a uniform state law gives school policies greater weight when challenged by students or parents, the Republican lawmaker has contended.

"These devices are addictive," Tisdel told reporters. "They're intentionally addictive. The algorithms driving the social media sites are meant to bring you back and keep you on, and they're monetizing our kids' attention and turning them into valuable data points that they can sell."

Polehanki, a former high school teacher, said forcing teachers to try to monitor student cellphone use has disrupted classrooms. Having the power of state law behind educators will help, she said.

"I think what everyone can agree upon is that cellphones don't belong in the classroom during instruction," Polehanki said.

In the Senate, Sen. Michele Hoitenga opposed the bills. She said that while she agrees that limiting cellphone use in schools can lead to positive educational outcomes, she doesn't believe more laws are necessary.

"Schools can already establish their own phone policies at the local level without a government mandate," Hoitenga said.

Whitmer said about half of the 50 states already have policies on cellphones in classrooms, and they've seen positive results.

Behavioral issues have declined in California, and test scores have jumped in Florida, the governor said.

"When students put their phones down, their grades go up," Whitmer said.

Carcia Young, an algebra teacher at Waverly, spoke in support of the new law, saying it was about protecting the learning environment so students can focus on their education and their future.

Waverly already had its own district policy against cellphones and

See **CELL PHONES**, page A2

The Tribune:
Celebrating
Our 127th Year

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## PLUNGE

From page A1

plunge since it made its debut at Watermark. This year, they had 17 members in their group take part in the icy tradition.

"We've tried to do a theme each year, and it's fun to see what all the teams do and all the different costumes, and that helps make it even more fun," he said. "Some of our members have their kids doing it with them, which is great to see."

St. Joseph resident Angela Walker took the plunge Saturday with her coworkers from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. Together, they were dressed in 1980s workout gear.

Walker said she's taken part in the event for eight years in a row, including once when they jumped into the river near Plank's Tavern on the Water. During another year, she did the plunge at Bell's Brewery in Kalamazoo.

"Honestly, I'm a social worker and my heart goes out to kids. I work with kids on a day-to-day basis, and I'm here to give to the less fortunate," she said. "Those kids deserve a chance to be just like everybody else."

### A highlight event

Heit was one of the first in attendance to acknowledge the number of plungers seems to increase each year.

"The event keeps getting bigger, so it's just better for Special Olympics' mission," he said.

When he and his business partners sought to open Watermark in downtown Stevensville, Mason said they never thought they would be hosting community-wide events like the Polar Plunge.

"This is one of the highlight events of our year that we look forward to," Mason said. "But we realized over the years, we're selling community – we're selling the ability to be that third place for a lot of people."

Berrien County Sheriff Chuck Heit exits the tank Saturday in downtown Stevensville, during the 2026 Polar Plunge benefiting Special Olympics Michigan.

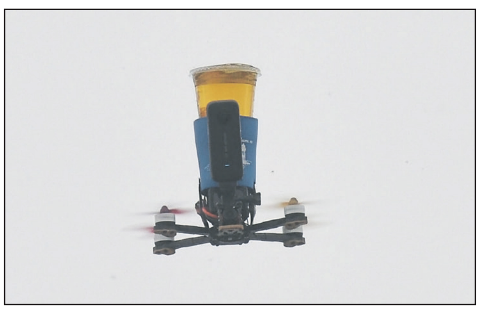
Photos by Don Campbell / Paxton Media Group

Teams take the plunge Saturday at Watermark Brewing Co. in downtown Stevensville, during the 2026 Polar Plunge benefiting Special Olympics Michigan.

Sue Ardy and Alexis Kroschel, with Lakeshore Public Schools, prepare to take the plunge Saturday at Watermark Brewing Co. in downtown Stevensville, during the 2026 Polar Plunge.

Tony Mandarino, with Honor Credit Union, jumps into a pool Saturday in downtown Stevensville, during the 2026 Polar Plunge benefiting Special Olympics Michigan.

A crowd gathers Saturday at Watermark Brewing Co. in downtown Stevensville, for the 2026 Polar Plunge benefiting Special Olympics Michigan.



A cup of beer arrives by drone Saturday at Watermark Brewing Co. in downtown Stevensville, during the 2026 Polar Plunge benefiting Special Olympics Michigan.

In preparation for the event, Mason said they begin talks about eight months out in advance. Because they're always slotted for the first weekend in February, those early planning discussions begin around the same time of year.

Mason credited the sheriff's department and Lincoln Township Fire Department for working out the logistics on traffic and safety. The folks who represent Special Olympics Michigan handle the majority of the back end help, which includes the changing areas and warming stations.

Among the biggest differences that have taken place since the Polar Plunge was moved to Watermark was the dunk tank that plungers jump into.

"In that first year, we actually had to assemble an above ground swimming pool and we put it in the beer garden," Mason recalled. "When the event was over, we had to empty it, and it drained and froze our entire beer garden."

A few years ago, the Special Olympics fabricated "the plungester," which now travels all over the state to the marquee.

The change has been good for Watermark, which has consistently finished in the top three plunge sites in Michigan for the past five years.

"My favorite part is just to see all the people from the year prior and what costumes they bring out. They're the ones who are bringing that energy to jump in and really just make it easy for us," Mason said. "The thing that kind of fills my cup the most is the parents that come with their kids who are involved in Special Olympics Michigan. The impact that it has on their family puts everything in perspective."

## HOUSING

From page A1

Authority) is an ever-changing animal and so they have changed the rules again for us and it involved the township and their role in how we proceed," Rigozzi said. "What they're asking now is that the township have part ownership in the property."

The rules are for the point system that MSHDA uses to award grants for projects and this recent change can add five points to the application score that plans to be submitted in April.

Rigozzi said there is no stated limit to how much ownership the township would need to have and it is a possibility for the township to have 1 percent ownership in order to help the project continue.

Stein said they may need to hold a special meeting to work out the details of what is needed to be done in time for the application deadline in April.

*Contact: jnewell@southhaventribune.com, 269-637-1104*

## CELL PHONES

From page A1

experienced a "powerful change" after it was put in place, Young said.

"When students are fully present, they participate more, retain more and achieve more," Young said.

Callan Maxwell, a senior at Waverly, endorsed the new law. She introduced Whitmer on Tuesday and stood by the governor while she signed the bills.

"High school is a place where you learn, you make mistakes, and you grow from them," Maxwell said. "But it's really hard to do that when your entire life exists within one tiny screen."

The legislation affects more than just cellphones in school. It prohibits the use of "wireless communications devices" that are capable of text messaging, voice communication, accessing the internet or receiving photos and videos.

Tisdel has said he believes the prohibition would affect devices like Apple Watches because they can access the internet and be synced with a cellphone for text messaging.

There are exemptions for school district-owned devices, such as tablets, and medically necessary devices. The new law also requires districts to have protocols in place for allowing students to use their devices during emergencies.

## Al-Van Humane Society

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Mon, Tue, Thurs, Fri 11 am to 5:30 pm; Sat 11 am to 3 pm; Wed, Sun Closed

### Meet our Pet of the Week, Helaena!

Helaena is a one-year-old black-and-white beauty with an adorable black spot on her nose. This sweet girl can be a little shy, but she's made great progress building her confidence in a loving foster home and is now back at the Adoption Center, ready to find her forever family. Helaena will thrive with a patient adopter who understands she may need a little time to settle in and feel safe. With love and understanding, she'll blossom into a devoted companion. To submit an adoption survey, Valentine Open House

Celebrate Valentine's Day with Al-Van Humane Society at our Valentine's Open House, a fun and feel-good event for animal lovers of all kinds. Join us for an afternoon filled with unique activities, adoptable pets, and opportunities to support the animals in our care. Whether you're looking to adopt, support the shelter, or just spend some quality time with animals, this open house is a perfect way to share the love. Stop by, explore the shelter, and see how your support helps pets find their forever homes.

Event highlights include:
Blind Date with a Pet: Need a date for Valentine's Day? We've got you covered! Let us play matchmaker and pair you with one of our adoptable animals for a one-on-one date.

Angel Adoptions: Cupid is feeling generous this Valentine's Day. Thanks to a kind Angel donor, adoption fees for all animals will be fully covered during our Open House.

Poo on You: This Valentine's Day, let us help you turn petty into productive. For a $5 donation, write a name on a paper heart, and we'll place it in a litter box for one of our cats to deliver the ultimate form of closure.

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# Michigan Maritime Museum to kick off 2026 lecture series

**By TRIBUNE STAFF**

VAN HEEST

SOUTH HAVEN — The Michigan Maritime Museum recently announced the opening of their 2026 Lecture Series with a presentation entitled "History of the Great Lakes in 12 Shipwrecks."

According to a news release, the lecture will be presented by maritime historian, author, and underwater explorer Valerie van Heest at 6:30 p.m. on Feb. 25

"In celebration of the United States' 250th anniversary, van Heest debuts a compelling new multimedia program exploring twelve historic shipwrecks that collectively illustrate the evolution of commercial transportation on the Great Lakes," the release stated. "These stories not only highlight pivotal events leading to America's founding but also trace how two and a half centuries of change have shaped both the North American landscape and the shipping industry."

Van Heest is an acclaimed underwater explorer and historian involved in the discovery and archaeological documentation of numerous Great Lakes shipwrecks.

"Blending her maritime passion with her professional writing and design background, she shares her work through award-winning books, films, lectures and museum exhibits that educate, entertain and inspire," the release stated.

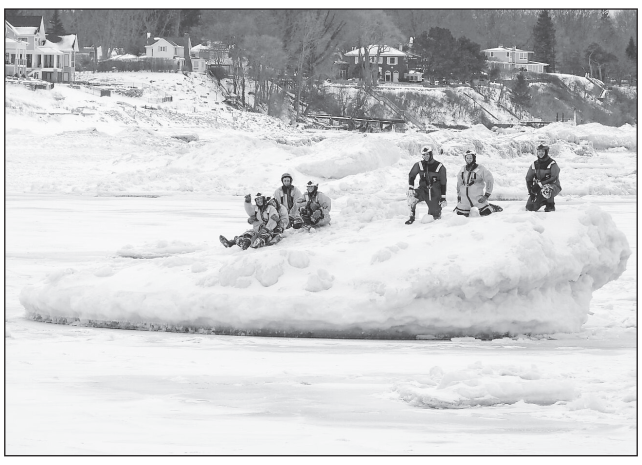
She is a member of the Women Divers Hall of Fame and a recipient of a Michigan State History Award for her efforts in preserving the state's submerged maritime heritage.

Tickets for this event are free for museum members and $10 for non-members. Doors open at 6 p.m. Tickets may be purchased online, by phone or in person.

The Michigan Maritime Museum Lecture Series is made possible through the support of the Nielsen-Wells Grant Fund and Mike and Susan Smith. Recorded and virtual viewing of many lectures is made possible thanks to the support of Steve and Emily Holt.

For more information or questions on the lecture contact Valerie van Heest at 616-566-6009 or via email at valerie@laffertyvanheest.com.

South Haven Area Emergency Services brave the cold to participate in ice water rescue training.



Photos provided / Tom Renner

Two dozen South Haven Area Emergency Service members donned cold weather suits to participate in rescue drills on the Lake Michigan ice shelf.

South Haven Area Emergency Services sharpen their skills with ice water rescue drills on the Lake Michigan ice shelf.

There have been multiple ice shelf emergencies that South Haven Emergency Services responded to this winter.

# Safety drills

## SH first responders prepare for winter emergencies

**By TRIBUNE STAFF**

SOUTH HAVEN — There were no sun tans gained this time of the year as South Haven Area Emergency Services responders recently took advantage of the break in the snowy weather to sharpen their skills.

According to a news release from SHAES, more than two dozen members donned cold weather suits throughout the week and ventured onto the Lake Michigan ice shelf in South Haven for the drill.

Emergency services have been called multiple times this winter to make ice shelf rescues. None of the rescues required going into the water, but the danger is there for anyone who ventures onto the ice.

# Realtors give 2025 recap of SWMI housing market

**By TONY WITTKOWSKI**
Paxton Media Group

After a boom in home sales for several years in Southwest Michigan, Realtors are saying the market has settled down to pre-peak levels.

"While housing sales were increasing, so were the prices," said Luke Jeffries, association executive of Southwestern Michigan Association of Realtors. "In 2016, the average selling price was $199,042, and at the end of 2025, the average selling price was $492,373 for a 147 percent increase."

He said the available housing inventory for sale across Allegan, Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties were readily consumed. The inventory at the end of 2016 was 1,508 homes for sale, but at the end of December 2025, there were 654 houses for sale in the Southwest Michigan market.

Mortgage rates rose from 6.13 in January, to 7.17 in April, then settled at 6.15 by the end of 2025 for a 30-year conventional mortgage.

In 2025, only in August and September did the number of houses sold in a month reach 300 sales in given month. The average selling prices peaked in December at $492,373, and the median selling price peaked in June at $324,471.

In December 2025, the number of houses sold increased 3 percent compared to December 2024. Year-to-date, sales in 2025 rose 4 percent to 2,917 from 2,811 in 2024.

The average selling price in December 2025 at $492,373, was 35 percent higher than the average selling price of $363,697 in December 2024. The highest selling price in the year-over-year comparison was in December at $492,373.

The year-to-date average selling price of $433,508 climbed 15 percent over 2024, setting a record in the year-over-year comparison.

The median selling price for December 2025 was $295,000, which rose 13 percent above the $259,946 median selling price for December 2024.

The year-to-date median selling price of $295,000 grew 7 percent higher than the $275,000 in 2024 and set a record in the year-over-year comparison.

The yearly total dollar volume in 2025 rose 19 percent from December 2024.

Across all of Southwest Michigan, there were two bank-owned or foreclosed homes as part of all transactions in December 2025, which was 0.9 percent. There were 51 houses in total in 2025.

Jeffries said they want to be cautious about making specific predictions for the housing market in 2026, but often look to trusted national data for context.

"Locally, Southwest Michigan's median home price increased 7 percent in 2025, outpacing the national median price increase of 3 percent," he said. "That relative strength reflects continued demand for our region. Looking ahead, the National Association of Realtors is forecasting the average mortgage rate for 2026 to be around 6 percent, which would represent an improvement from the higher average rates buyers experienced through much of 2025. Although rates dipped near that level at the end of the year, a lower annual average could help bring more buyers back into the market and encourage sellers who have been waiting on the sidelines to make a move."

### Across the country

Existing-home sales increased by 5.1 percent in December, according to the National Association of Realtors. Year-over-year, sales improved by 1.4 percent.

Month-over-month sales increased in all regions. Year-over-year sales increased in the South, remained flat in the Midwest and West, and decreased in the Northeast.

"2025 was another tough year for homebuyers, marked by record-high home prices and historically low home sales," said NAR Chief Economist Lawrence Yun. "However, in the fourth quarter, conditions began improving with lower mortgage rates and slower home price growth. December home sales, after adjusting for seasonal factors, were the strongest in nearly three years. The gains were broad-based, with all four major regions improving from the prior month."

The median existing-home price for all housing types in December was $405,400, up 0.4 percent from one year ago – the 30th consecutive month of year-over-year price increases.

"Inventory levels remain tight," Yun said. "With fewer sellers feeling eager to move, homeowners are taking their time deciding when to list or delist their homes. Similar to past years, more inventory is expected to come to market beginning in February."

In the Midwest, existing-home sales increased 2 percent in sales month over month to an annual rate of 1 million, unchanged year over year. The median price in the Midwest was $306,000, up 3.1 percent from December 2024.

Total housing inventory registered at the end of December was 1.18 million units, down 18.1 percent from November and up 3.5 percent from December 2024. Unsold inventory sits at a 3.3-month supply at the current sales pace, down from 4.2 months in November and up from 3.2 months in December 2024.

# Dr. Fred Johnson III to speak at historical association event

**By TRIBUNE STAFF**

SOUTH HAVEN — In honor of Black History Month, the Historical Association of South Haven will welcome back Dr. Fred Johnson III for a presentation entitled "The Third Reconstruction."

According to a news release, the presentation will take place at 7 p.m. on Feb. 18 at the Hartman School headquarters, 355 Hubbard St. in South Haven.

"This program will focus on the reconstruction the nation is currently navigating resulting from major events beginning in 2008 – Barack Obama's election and two administrations, the recession in 2008, the global pandemic and the challenges that have arisen since – all combining to produce conditions for a burgeoning constitutional crisis," the release stated.

Dr. Johnson is an award-winning speaker and professor of history at Hope College. He was appointed to the Guy Vander Jagt '53 Endowed Professorship in 2023 and has written numerous books and scholarly articles, as well as producing a documentary on the Ku Klux Klan in Michigan.

The event is free and open to the public.

# Road commission implements seasonal weight restrictions

**By TRIBUNE STAFF**

LAWRENCE — The Van Buren County Road Commission recently announced they will implement full seasonal weight restrictions for all roadways under its jurisdiction, except for county all-season roads.

According to a news release, the restriction will begin at 6 a.m. on Feb. 16.

"Seasonal weight restrictions are designed to preserve roads from damage caused by heavy vehicles during the freeze-thaw cycle", Permit Officer and County Weighmaster AJ Brucks said in the release. "As the ground thaws, moisture pushes upward toward the road surface, creating pressure that leads to potholes and other forms of deterioration. The heavier the vehicle, the higher the risk of damage."

Under state law, road agencies may enact restrictions on non-all-season roads when conditions require it.

During this period:

- Axle-loading limits are reduced by 35 percent.
- Maximum travel speed is reduced to 35 MPH for vehicles over 10,000 lbs.
- The road commission does not issue any overweight or oversize moving permits when seasonal weight restrictions are in place.

All roads under the jurisdiction of the road commission are restricted unless specifically designated as "all-season".

For more information, go to the road commission's website at www.vbcrc.org/seasonalpermits.

To receive future email updates from the Road Commission regarding seasonal weight restrictions, contact Permit Officer AJ Brucks at AJBrucks@vbcrc.org or by phone at 269-674-8011, extension 252.

# 2 guilty in scheme that kept 7 candidates off the 2022 ballot

**By KARA BERG**
The Detroit News (TNS)

MOUNT CLEMENS — Two men accused of being the ringleaders of a signature fraud scheme that kept the names of seven judicial and gubernatorial candidates off the August 2022 primary ballot have been found guilty of forging citizen signatures, and one has been acquitted on all counts.

Shawn Wilmoth and Willie Reed were found guilty Monday by a Macomb County jury of forging or allowing the forgery of signatures on nominating petitions and defrauding the Republican gubernatorial campaigns of Perry Johnson, James Craig, Donna Brandenburg, Michael Brown (who currently is serving as Lincoln Township clerk) and Michael Markey, as well as judicial candidates Tricia Dare, John Cahalan and John Michael Malone. Reed was also convicted of stealing from Ryan Kelley's gubernatorial campaign, but Wilmoth was acquitted.

Wilmoth's wife, Jamie Wilmoth, was accused of the same acts, but the jury found her not guilty on all charges.

Monday's verdict followed a multiple-day trial in Macomb County Circuit Court.

Assistant Attorney General Chris Kessel said at the start of the trial Feb. 28 that the Wilmoths and Reed own businesses that hire people to collect signatures that allow candidates for public office to get their names put on the ballot. He alleges they allowed for the falsification of signatures on these nominating petitions, as 68 percent of the citizen signatures submitted to the state Board of Electors were found to be false.

Shawn Wilmoth was convicted of one count each of conducting a criminal enterprise, seven counts of election law forgery, two counts of false pretense of $100,000 or more, two counts of false pretenses over $50,000, three counts of false pretenses over $20,000 and seven counts of using a computer to commit fraud.

Wilmoth was found not guilty of one count of false pretense of $100,000 or more, one count of election law forgery, two counts of using a computer to commit fraud and one count of larceny.

Conducting a criminal enterprise and false pretenses over $1,000 – the most serious of the charges – carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

Reed, meanwhile, was convicted of one count of conducting a criminal enterprise, three counts of election law forgery, two counts of false pretense of $100,000 or more, two counts of false pretenses over $50,000, one counts of false pretenses over $20,000, four counts of using a computer to commit fraud and one count of larceny between $1,000 and $20,000.

Reed was found not guilty of five counts of election fraud, one count of false pretense of $100,000 or more, two counts of false pretenses over $20,000, five counts of using a computer to commit fraud.

# South Haven Tribune CLASSIFIEDS

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**Hours:** Monday - Friday 9am-2pm EST

## 0100 ANNOUNCEMENTS

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## 0200 EMPLOYMENT

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## 0900 LEGALS

**STATE OF MICHIGAN
PROBATE COURT**

**VAN BUREN COUNTY
NOTICE TO CREDITORS
Decedent's Estate**

**CASE NO. and JUDGE**
2026-1009-DE
Hon. Susan Metzger

**Court address & Court tele no.**
212 E. Paw Paw Street, #220,
Paw Paw, MI 49079
269.657.8225

**Estate of** Steven Edward Latta, deceased
**Date of birth:** * 09/26/1966

**TO ALL CREDITORS: ****

**NOTICE TO CREDITORS:**
The decedent, Steven Edward Latta, died April 19, 2024. Creditors of the decedent are notified that all claims against the estate will be forever barred unless presented to Michael Latta, personal representative, or to both the probate court at 212 E Paw Paw Street, Suite 220, Paw Paw, MI 49079 and the personal representative within 4 months after the date of publication of this notice.

January 27, 2026
**Date**

Ean P. Hamilton P79755
**Attorney name Bar no.**
3431 Oakland Dr.
**Address**
Kalamazoo, MI 49008
269-488-8394
**City, state, zip Telephone no.**

Michael Latta
**Personal representative name**
29621 Jewells Drive
**Address**
Lawton, MI 49065
**City, state, zip**
269-251-3035
**Telephone no.**

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**NOTICE OF MARCH BOARD OF REVIEW**

The South Haven Township Board of Review will meet at the South Haven Township Hall, 09761 Blue Star Memorial Hwy, South Haven, MI 49090, on the following dates and times to review property assessments and hear appeals:

**Organizational Meeting (No appeals will be heard at this meeting): Tuesday, March 3, 2026, at 2:00 p.m.**

**Appeal Hearings:**
Monday, March 9
* 2:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.
* 6:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.
Thursday, March 12
* 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.
* 1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.

This meeting provides taxpayers the opportunity to review their property assessments and present appeals to the Board of Review. Taxpayers who are unable to attend in person should contact the Township Office for information on alternate appeal options.

For additional information, contact:
Don Jollay, MAAO
Assessor, South Haven Twp
Office: 269-637-3305
Cell: 815-546-8288
assessor@southhaventwpmi.gov

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## 0900 LEGALS

**STATE OF MICHIGAN
PROBATE COURT**
Van Buren **COUNTY**

**NOTICE TO CREDITORS
Decedent's Estate**

**CASE NO. and JUDGE**
26-1013-DE
METZGER

**Court address**
212 E. Paw Paw ST., Ste 220
Paw Paw, MI 49079
**Court telephone no.**
269-657-8225

**Estate of** Phillip David Braun
**Date of birth:** 07/10/1934

**TO ALL CREDITORS: ****

**NOTICE TO CREDITORS:**
The decedent, Phillip David Braun, died 08/08/2024. Creditors of the decedent are notified that all claims against the estate will be forever barred unless presented to David Braun, personal representative, or to both the probate court at 212 E. Paw Paw St., Paw Paw and the personal representative within 4 months after the date of publication of this notice.

February 10,2026
**Date**

Albert W. Laaksonen II P43920
**Attorney Bar no.**
226 1/2 E. Michigan Ave
**Address**
Paw Paw, MI 49079
**City, State, Zip**
269-655-1035
**Telephone**

David Braun
**Personal Representative**
141 Shrewberry Dr
**Address**
New Market, AL 35761
**City, state, zip**
269-355-3255
**Telephone**

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**City of Bangor Board of Review Organizational Meeting, Tuesday March 3rd at 8:30 am**

**Appeal Hearings** - Monday, March 9th 2-5pm and 6-9pm
Tuesday, March 10th 9am-Noon
Friday, March 13th 9am-Noon

**Letters must be received by 4pm March 12th.**

**Ratios:**
Commercial- 45.11% 1.1084
Industrial- 49.11% 1.0181
Residential- 44.92% 1.1130
any others previously listed should be at 50% 1.0000

## 0900 LEGALS

**STATE OF MICHIGAN
COUNTY OF VAN BUREN**

**NOTICE TO CREDITORS
DECEDENT'S TRUST**

**Decedent:** LYNNE MARY SZUMYLO, Deceased
**Date of birth:** 1947
**Trust:** LYNNE MARY SZUMYLO TRUST
**Dated:** OCTOBER 25, 2024

**NOTICE TO ALL CREDITORS:**
The decedent, LYNNE MARY SZUMYLO, who lived at 600 East Saint Joseph Street, Paw Paw, MI 49079, died 12/31/2025. The decedent established the LYNNE MARY SZUMYLO TRUST. There is no probate estate.
Creditors of the decedent are notified that all claims against the decedent and the LYNNE MARY SZUMYLO TRUST, will be forever barred unless presented to LANA ALLEN, the named Successor Trustee, within four (4) months after the date of publication of this notice.
Notice is further given that the Trust will thereafter be assigned and distributed to the persons entitled to it.

Date: 02/06/2026

Attorney: Michael A. Dombos (P49157)
Lewis, Reed & Allen, P.C.
136 East Michigan Ave, Ste 800
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49007
Phone: (269) 388-7600

Trustee: LANA ALLEN
7294 OLDENBURG LANE
PORTAGE, MI 49024

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**CASCO TOWNSHIP 2026 BOARD OF REVIEW NOTICE**
Assessor's Office Casco Township 7104 107th Ave
South Haven MI 49090
**BOARD OF REVIEW MEETING SCHEDULE**

The Casco Township **BOARD OF REVIEW** for 2026 will be held at the Casco Township Hall, 7104 107th Ave, South Haven Michigan on the following dates and times:
**ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING:** (No appeals will be heard at this meeting) Tuesday, March 3, 2026, at 1:00 p.m.
**APPEAL HEARINGS:**
Wed, March 11, 2026, from 9:00a. to 4:00p. (Closed Noon-1p.)
Thurs, March 12, 2026, from 2:00p. to 9:00p. (Closed 5-6p.)
***PLEASE NOTE—Appointments** are encouraged for the Board of Review meetings. To schedule an appointment call Kelly Jellison at 269-591-0289 or email kelly@assessingsolutions.com. A **resident** may protest to the Board of Review by letter. Letter appeals are to be accompanied by a completed Board of Review petition form (form L-4035). All letters of protest must be received by 5:00 p.m., Friday, March 6, 2026. The tentative ratios and the estimated multipliers for each class of real property and personal property for 2026 are as follows:
**Agriculture**.......44.63...1.12032 **Commercial**......48.82......1.02417
**Industrial**.........34.46....1.45096 **Residential**...... 43.70......1.14416
**Personal Property**....50.00.....1.0000

**Assessor Contact Information:**
Kelly Jellison, Casco Township Assessor
Dated: January 30, 2026
(269)591-0289, kelly@assessingsolutions.com

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CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE
PLANNING COMMISSION

On Thursday, March 5, 2026, the Planning Commission for the City of South Haven will hear public comments related to the following request(s). The public hearing(s) will be held at 7:00 P.M. at City Hall, 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven concerning the following:

**1. Special Land Use Application – 224 Elkenburg Street**
Mr. and Mrs. Terry and Tracy Brown have submitted a special land use application to use the dwelling unit located at 224 Elkenburg St in the City of South Haven as a short-term rental. The parcel number for the referenced address is 80-53-245-008-00.

**2. Special Land Use Application – 509 Phoenix Street**
Ms. Theresa Nowak has submitted a special land use application to use the third-floor dwelling unit located at 509 Phoenix St in the City of South Haven as a short-term rental. The parcel number for the referenced address is 80-53-770-007-30.

**3. Special Land Use Application – 500 Virginia Avenue**
Mr. Chris Coble of Blue Water Pools of Grand Rapids, on behalf of the Oak Harbor Condominium Association, has submitted a special land use application to install an inground pool in a waterfront yard at 500 Virginia Ave in the City of South Haven. The parcel for the referenced address is located on the east side of Kentucky Ave, between River Island Dr and Virginia Ave.

**4. Zoning Map Amendment (Conditional Rezoning) Application – 120 Baseline Road and 201 Webster Avenue**
Mr. David Wiatrowski, on behalf of 120 Baseline LLC, has submitted an application to conditionally rezone the property located at 120 Baseline Rd and 201 Webster Ave in the City of South Haven. The parcel at 120 Baseline Rd is approximately 7.53-acres and is currently zoned RM-1 Multiple-Family Residential. The parcel at 201 Webster Ave is approximately 0.13-acres and is currently zoned R-1B Single-Family Residential. The property owner seeks to rezone both parcels to MHC Manufactured Housing Community District and has voluntarily offered in writing conditions to the proposed rezoning of the land. The parcel numbers for the referenced addresses are 80-53-895-030-00 and 80-53-750-021-00.

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**Lake Michigan College, Benton Harbor MI, is soliciting proposals for Benefits Administration until 2 PM, EST, 2/27/26. Contact Nathan Main at nmain@lakemichigancollege.edu for info.**

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**Regulatory & Compliance Analyst (Watervliet, MI)** Reqs: Bachelor's or Foreign Equivalent in Pharmacy or Pharmaceutical Science or Drug Regulatory Affairs & 1 yr exp as Regulatory & Compliance Analyst. Duties: Ensure adherence to HIPAA, FDA, DEA, CMS, FWA, Medicare & Medicaid regs. Develop, implement & update company policies, SOPs, compliance protocols & workstation procedures. Conduct internal audits, monitor non-compliance & create corrective action plans. Oversee external audits & inspections & prep req'd documentation. Manage PDMP submissions, resolve discrepancies, respond to compliance inquiries & regulatory findings. Review patient complaints, ensure timely adverse drug reporting & collab with pharmacists on MTM services. Maintain CII–CV controlled substance inventory records & implement anti-diversion measures. Monitor regulatory changes through NACDS, FMI, Medicare/Medicaid, DEA, HIPAA, FWA updates & align compliance strategy with company goals. Support business continuity, disaster recovery, strategic planning to strengthen compliance, efficiency & future growth. Salary: $60,000/yr. Benefits: PTO. Mail Resumes to: Watervliet Community Pharmacy LLC, d/b/a Watervliet Community Pharmacy 8593 Red Arrow Hwy, Watervliet, MI 49098

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2026 BOARD OF REVIEW HEARINGS
CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN, MICHIGAN

The City of South Haven 2026 Board of Review will be in session in the City Council Chambers at City Hall, 539 Phoenix Street, according to the following schedule:

- Tuesday, March 3rd. 9:00 a.m. for Board Organization and review of assessment roll. (No hearing of appeals)
- Tuesday, March 10th. 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon, and 1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. hearing of appeals by scheduled appointment. Walk-ins will be seen if time allows between scheduled appointments.
- Thursday, March 12th. 3:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m., hearing of appeals by appointment. Walk-ins will be seen if time allows between scheduled appointments.

Additional sessions may be scheduled by the board if deemed necessary. Appeals may be made by appointment or walk-ins, in person; by an authorized representative; or in writing if received by Thursday, March 12th no later than 5:00 p.m.

Further information may be obtained from the City of South haven Assessor's office, 539 Phoenix St., South Haven, MI 49090 (269) 637-0745.

**2026 Van Buren County – City of South Haven**

| Property Class | Tentative Ratio | Estimated Multiplier |
|---|---|---|
| Agricultural | None Classed | None Classed |
| Commercial | 37.84% | 1.32135 |
| Industrial | 51.14% | 0.97771 |
| Residential | 47.92% | 1.04341 |
| Personal | 50.00% | 1.00000 |

**2026 Allegan County – City of South Haven**

| Property Class | Tentative Ratio | Estimated Multiplier |
|---|---|---|
| Residential | 47.92% | 1.04341 |

THE SOUTH HAVEN CITY HALL IS BARRIER FREE AND THE CITY OF SOUTH HAVEN WILL PROVIDE THE NECESSARY REASONABLE AUXILIARY AIDS AND SERVICES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES, SUCH AS SIGNERS FOR THE HEARING IMPAIRED AND AUDIO TAPES OF PRINTED MATERIALS BEING CONSIDERED AT THE MEETING TO INDIVIDUAL WITH DISABILITIES AT THE MEETING UPON SEVEN (7) DAYS NOTICE TO THE SOUTH HAVEN CITY CLERK. INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES REQUIRING SERVICES SHOULD CONTACT THE CITY CLERK BY WRITING OR CALL THE SOUTH HAVEN CITY HALL.

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# SOUTH HAVEN COMMUNITY CALENDAR

## Ongoing events

**Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting:** Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

**Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting:** Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

**Three Blondes Brewing:** Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

**Sparkle and Spice Boutique:** Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9-10 a.m.

**South Haven Center for the Arts:** Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

**South Haven Center for the Arts:** Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

**Candlelight Yoga:** Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

**Food pantry:** First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

**Food pantry:** Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1 to 4 p.m. on Thursdays.

**Food, clothing, baby pantry:** Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

**Personal care and clothing pantry:** First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

**Baby pantry:** Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

**Baby pantry:** Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

**South Haven Memorial Library:** Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays through May 26, 2026.

**HawksHead:** Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

**Michigan Maritime Museum:** Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

**Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum:** "Over and Under the Snow" by Kate Messner and Christopher Silas Neal StoryWalk available from Jan. 1 to Feb. 28. Call to schedule an appointment.

**Lakeside Social Bowling Alley:** Glow Bowl every Friday from noon to 9 p.m.

**Bridge:** Chicago Scoring at 1 p.m. on Tuesdays at the South Haven Memorial Library.

**Bridge:** Duplicate Scoring at 1 p.m. on Wednesdays at the South Haven Memorial Library.

**Michigan Maritime Museum:** free admission on the first Sunday of every month from November through April.

**First United Methodist Church:** Free meals every Tuesday night. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Meal is served at 6 p.m.

## February

**15 – First Congregational UCC:** Winter Concert Series to feature folk duo Payton and Annabelle at 3 p.m. Tickets are $20 at the door.

**16 – Basketball:** Girls middle school team against Watervliet High School at 4 p.m. at Baseline Middle School.

**16 – Basketball:** Girls middle school team against Coloma High School at 5 p.m. at Baseline Middle School.

**17 – Rotary Club:** Evening meeting at 5:30 p.m. at the American Legion – Dan Liehr is the program chair.

**17 – Scott Club:** A Quilting Journey at 1 p.m. at the First Congregational Church at 651 Phoenix Street.

**18 – Basketball:** Boys freshman team against Otsego High School at 4 p.m. at South Haven High School.

**18 – Basketball:** Boys junior varsity team against Otsego High School at 5:30 p.m. at South Haven High School.

**18 – Basketball:** Boys varsity team against Otsego High School at 7 p.m. at South Haven High School.

**19 – After Business Hours:** From 5 to 7 p.m. at Mill Hall at 142 W. Monroe St. Bangor, MI.

**20 – South Haven Memorial Library:** Messy Play Fridays for preschoolers from 11 a.m. to noon. Wear clothes that can get messy.

**20 – Basketball:** Girls varsity team against Allegan Public School at 6 p.m. at South Haven High School.

**20 – Basketball:** Boys varsity team against Allegan Public School at 7:30 p.m. at South Haven High School.

**21 – South Haven Memorial Library:** Free STEM Saturdays event with legos and other rotating STEM activities from 11 a.m. to noon.

**21 – Al-Van Humane Society:** Fur Ball 2026: Breakfast at Tiffany's fundraiser event at the Black River Barn.

**21 – Basketball:** Girls middle school team in the 6th grade Jamboree at 10 a.m. at Baseline Middle School.

**24 – Brookside Farms:** Meet and greet with Van Buren County District Court Judge candidate Rachel Keeley from 4:30 to 7:30 p.m.

**24 – Basketball:** Girls freshman team against St. Joseph High School at 4 p.m. at South Haven High School.

**24 – Basketball:** Girls junior varsity team against Watervliet High School at 5:30 p.m. at South Haven High School.

**24 – Basketball:** Girls varsity team against Watervliet High School at 7 p.m. at South Haven High School.

**24 – Rotary Club:** Morning meeting – SHAES Chief Brandon Hinz to present SHAES 2025 review and updates.

**24 – South Haven Area Young Professionals:** Coffee Connections from 8:30 to 9:30 a.m. at The Flying Saucer.

**25 – South Haven Memorial Library:** Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

**25 – Michigan Maritime Museum:** Lecture Series featuring Valerie van Heest with a "History of the Great Lakes in 12 Shipwrecks at 6:30 p.m. $10 for non-members, free for museum members.

**26 – Basketball:** Girls freshman team against Hasting High School at 4 p.m. at South Haven High School.

**26 – Basketball:** Girls junior varsity team against Berrien Springs High School at 5:30 p.m. at South Haven High School.

**26 – Basketball:** Girls varsity team against Berrien Springs High School at 7 p.m. at South Haven High School.

**27 – Swimming:** Boys varsity championship meet.

**27 – South Haven Memorial Library:** Parent Cafes from 11 a.m. to noon. Snacks and engaging conversation about self-care, support and community resources. Free event. Kids can enjoy Stuffed Animal Story Time with the library staff during the event.

**28 – Job Fair:** Hosted by the City of South Haven and South Haven Area Emergency Services from noon to 2 p.m. at City Hall.

**28 – South Haven Memorial Library:** Astronomy Club at 11 a.m.

## March

**3 – Scott Club:** Remembering Remarkable Michigan Women at 1 p.m. at First Congregational Church. Attendees are encouraged to wear their own hats in celebration of women's history month.

**6 – South Haven Memorial Library:** Play-Doh Play Date free event for preschoolers at 11 a.m.

**11 – South Haven Memorial Library:** Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

**12 – South Haven Indivisible:** Book discussion on "The Flag and the Cross" from 4 to 5 p.m. at the South Haven Memorial Library.

**12 – South Haven Area Young Professionals:** Monthly networking event from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. at South Haven Brewpub

**17 – Scott Club:** Celebrate St. Patrick's Day with music, Celtics and classics at 1 p.m. at Senior Services.

**18 – South Haven Memorial Library:** Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

**19 – South Haven Memorial Library:** DIY at the library event to learn how to make homemade sugar scrubs at 4 p.m.

**20 – South Haven Memorial Library:** Messy Play Fridays for preschoolers from 11 a.m. to noon. Wear clothes that can get messy.

**21 – South Haven Memorial Library:** Free STEM Saturdays event with legos and other rotating STEM activities from 11 a.m. to noon.

**25 – South Haven Memorial Library:** Friends of the South Haven library meeting from 2 to 3 p.m. The public is welcome to attend.

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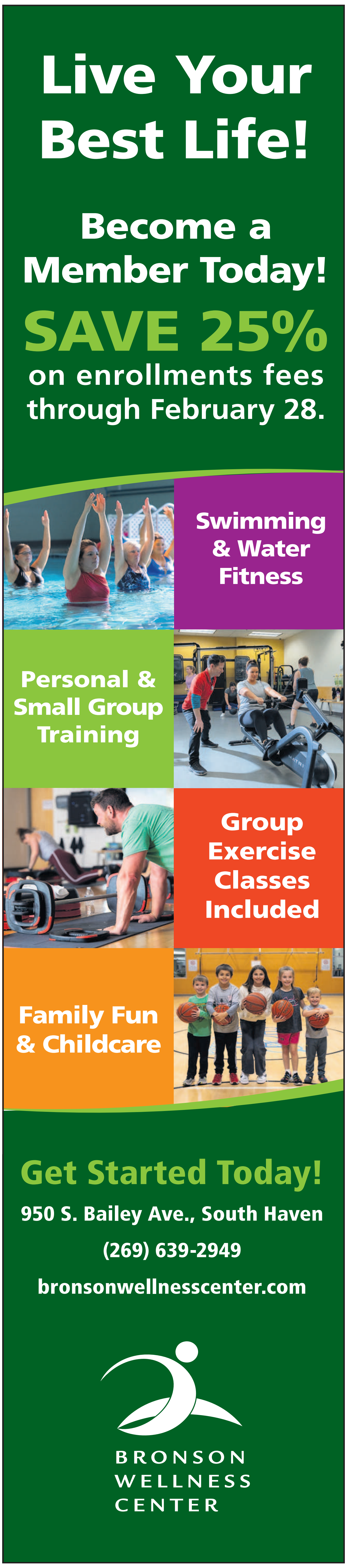
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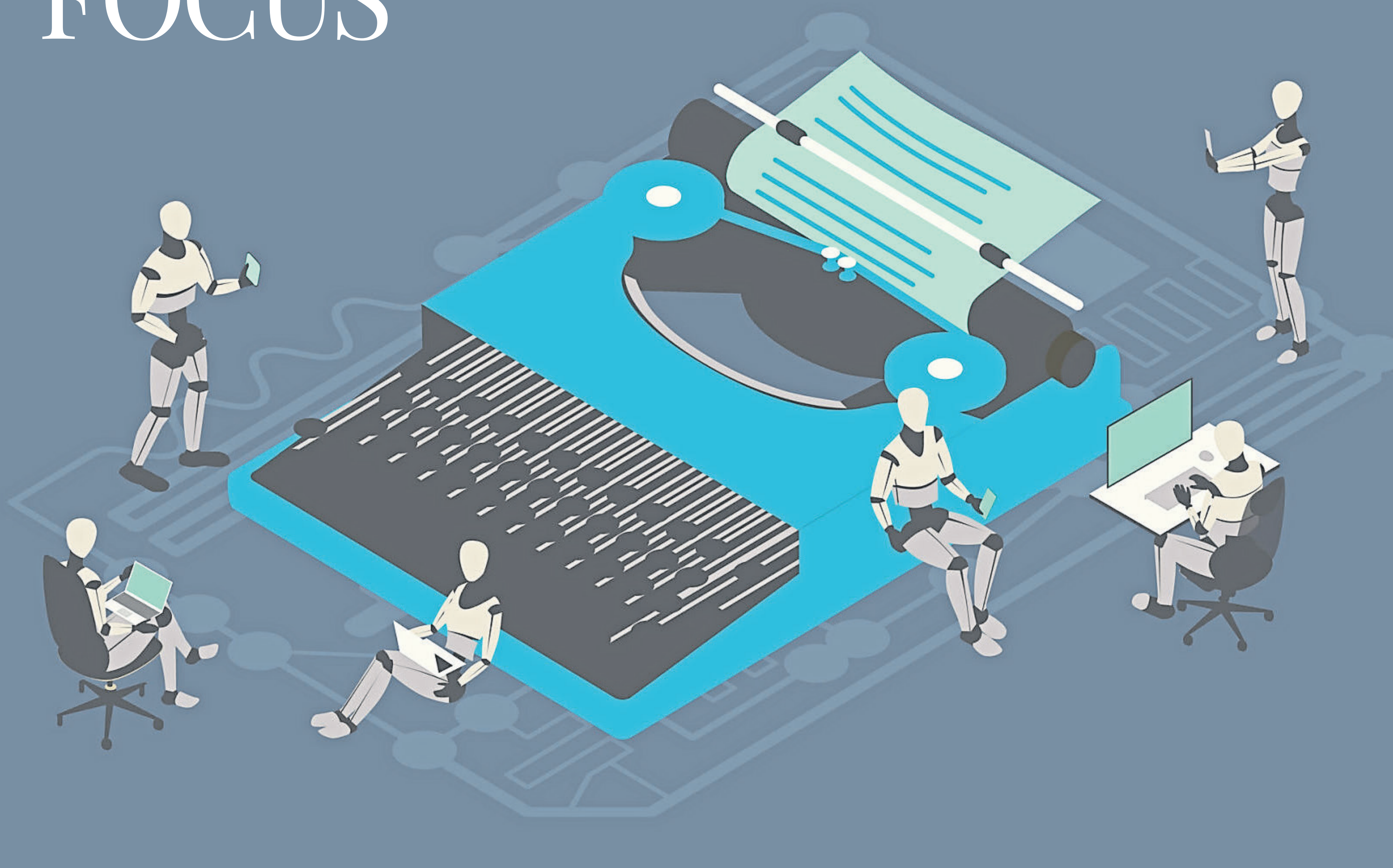
# FOCUS



mathisworks / Getty Images

## AI-generated text is overwhelming institutions – setting off a no-win ‘arms race’ with AI detectors

**By BRUCE SCHNEIER**
Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School
**and NATHAN SANDERS**
Affiliate, Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University
(The Conversation)

In 2023, the science fiction literary magazine Clarkesworld stopped accepting new submissions because so many were generated by artificial intelligence. Near as the editors could tell, many submitters pasted the magazine’s detailed story guidelines into an AI and sent in the results. And they weren’t alone. Other fiction magazines have also reported a high number of AI-generated submissions.

This is only one example of a ubiquitous trend. A legacy system relied on the difficulty of writing and cognition to limit volume. Generative AI overwhelms the system because the humans on the receiving end can’t keep up.

This is happening everywhere. Newspapers are being inundated by AI-generated letters to the editor, as are academic journals. Lawmakers are inundated with AI-generated constituent comments. Courts around the world are flooded with AI-generated filings, particularly by people representing themselves. AI conferences are flooded with AI-generated research papers. Social media isflooded with AI posts. In music, open source software, education, investigative journalism and hiring, it’s the same story.

Like Clarkesworld’s initial response, some of these institutions shut down their submissions processes. Others have met the offensive of AI inputs with some defensive response, often involving a counteracting use of AI. Academic peer reviewers increasingly use AI to evaluate papers that may have been generated by AI. Social media platforms turn to AI moderators. Court systems use AI to triage and process litigation volumes supercharged by AI. Employers turn to AI tools to review candidate applications. Educators use AI not just to grade papers and administer exams, but as a feedback tool for students.

These are all arms races: rapid, adversarial iteration to apply a common technology to opposing purposes. Many of these arms races have clearly deleterious effects. Society suffers if the courts are clogged with frivolous, AI-manufactured cases. There is also harm if the established measures of academic performance – publications and citations – accrue to those researchers most willing to fraudulently submit AI-written letters and papers rather than to those whose ideas have the most impact. The fear is that, in the end, fraudulent behavior enabled by AI will undermine systems and institutions that society relies on.

### Upsides of AI

Yet some of these AI arms races have surprising hidden upsides, and the hope is that at least some institutions will be able to change in ways that make them stronger.

Science seems likely to become stronger thanks to AI, yet it faces a problem when the AI makes mistakes. Consider the example of nonsensical, AI-generated phrasing filtering into scientific papers.

A scientist using an AI to assist in writing an academic paper can be a good thing, if used carefully and with disclosure. AI is increasingly a primary tool in scientific research: for reviewing literature, programming and for coding and analyzing data. And for many, it has become a crucial support for expression and scientific communication. Pre-AI, better-funded researchers could hire humans to help them write their academic papers. For many authors whose primary language is not English, hiring this kind of assistance has been an expensive necessity. AI provides it to everyone.

In fiction, fraudulently submitted AI-generated works cause harm, both to the human authors now subject to increased competition and to those readers who may feel defrauded after unknowingly reading the work of a machine. But some outlets may welcome AI-assisted submissions with appropriate disclosure and under particular guidelines, and leverage AI to evaluate them against criteria like originality, fit and quality.

Others may refuse AI-generated work, but this will come at a cost. It’s unlikely that any human editor or technology can sustain an ability to differentiate human from machine writing. Instead, outlets that wish to exclusively publish humans will need to limit submissions to a set of authors they trust to not use AI. If these policies are transparent, readers can pick the format they prefer and read happily from either or both types of outlets.

We also don’t see any problem if a job seeker uses AI to polish their resumes or write better cover letters: The wealthy and privileged have long had access to human assistance for those things. But it crosses the line when AIs are used to lie about identity and experience, or to cheat on job interviews.

Similarly, a democracy requires that its citizens be able to express their opinions to their representatives, or to each other through a medium like the newspaper. The rich and powerful have long been able to hire writers to turn their ideas into persuasive prose, and AIs providing that assistance to more people is a good thing, in our view. Here, AI mistakes and bias can be harmful. Citizens may be using AI for more than just a time-saving shortcut; it may be augmenting their knowledge and capabilities, generating statements about historical, legal or policy factors they can’t reasonably be expected to independently check.

### Fraud booster

What we don’t want is for lobbyists to use AIs in astroturf campaigns, writing multiple letters and passing them off as individual opinions. This, too, is an older problem that AIs are making worse.

What differentiates the positive from the negative here is not any inherent aspect of the technology, it’s the power dynamic. The same technology that reduces the effort required for a citizen to share their lived experience with their legislator also enables corporate interests to misrepresent the public at scale. The former is a power-equalizing application of AI that enhances participatory democracy; the latter is a power-concentrating application that threatens it.

In general, we believe writing and cognitive assistance, long available to the rich and powerful, should be available to everyone. The problem comes when AIs make fraud easier. Any response needs to balance embracing that newfound democratization of access with preventing fraud.

There’s no way to turn this technology off. Highly capable AIs are widely available and can run on a laptop. Ethical guidelines and clear professional boundaries can help – for those acting in good faith. But there won’t ever be a way to totally stop academic writers, job seekers or citizens from using these tools, either as legitimate assistance or to commit fraud. This means more comments, more letters, more applications, more submissions.

The problem is that whoever is on the receiving end of this AI-fueled deluge can’t deal with the increased volume. What can help is developing assistive AI tools that benefit institutions and society, while also limiting fraud. And that may mean embracing the use of AI assistance in these adversarial systems, even though the defensive AI will never achieve supremacy.

### Balancing harms with benefits

The science fiction community has been wrestling with AI since 2023. Clarkesworld eventually reopened submissions, claiming that it has an adequate way of separating human- and AI-written stories. No one knows how long, or how well, that will continue to work.

The arms race continues. There is no simple way to tell whether the potential benefits of AI will outweigh the harms, now or in the future. But as a society, we can influence the balance of harms it wreaks and opportunities it presents as we muddle our way through the changing technological landscape.

*The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts. This article is republished under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article at https://theconversation.com.*

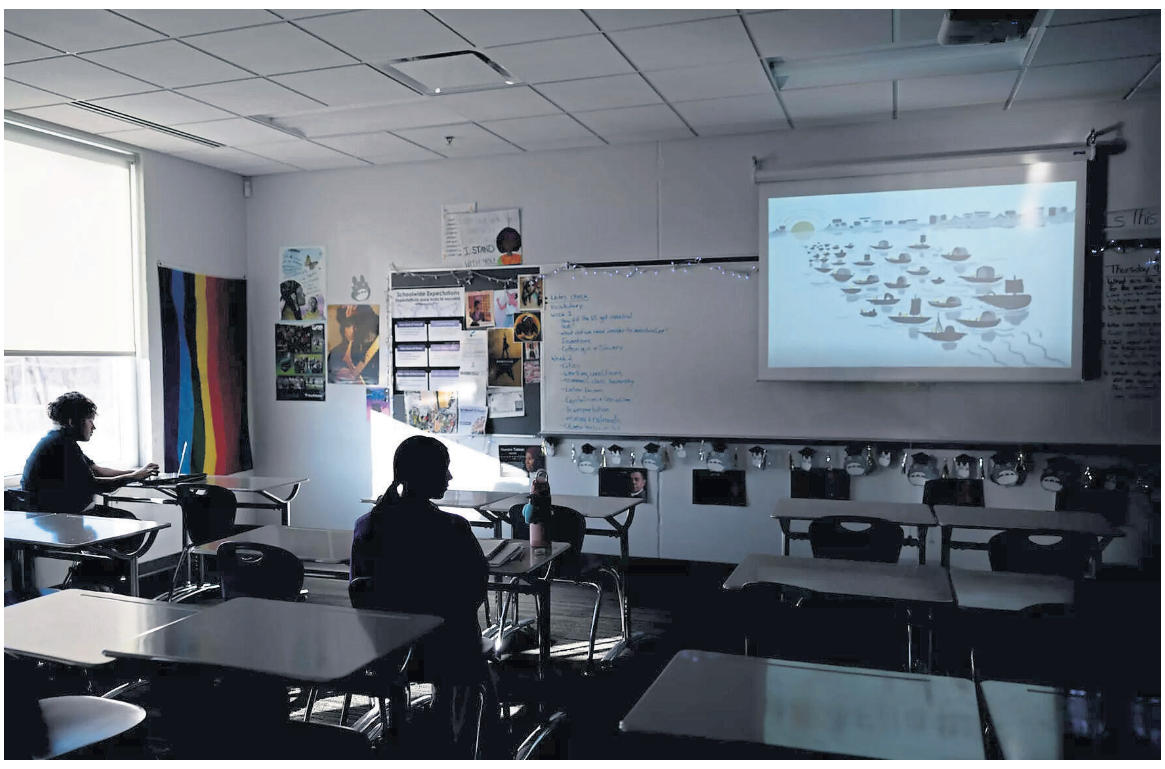
# FOCUS

# Inside a Minneapolis school where 50% of students are too afraid of ICE to show up

**By ANDREA CASTILLO**
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Photos by Eric Thayer / Los Angeles Times / TNS

A 16-year-old Minneapolis high school student who was detained by ICE and did not want to be identified.



Students at a Minneapolis high school classroom with many empty seats on Jan. 29.

MINNEAPOLIS — For weeks, administrators at this charter high school have arrived an hour before class, grabbed neon vests and walkie-talkies, and headed out into the cold to watch for ICE agents and escort students in.

Lately, fewer than half of the 800 sudents show up.

"Operation Metro Surge," the immigration crackdown in Minnesota that led to nationwide protests after federal agents shot and killed two U.S. citizens, has had students, parents and teachers on edge regardless of their immigration status.

Signs of a fearful new normal are all over the school. Green craft paper covers the bottom of many first-floor windows so outsiders can't peer in. A notice taped outside one door says unauthorized entry is prohibited: "This includes all federal law enforcement personnel and activities unless authorized by lawful written direction from appropriate school officials or a valid court order."

Staff coordinate throughout the day with a neighborhood watch group to determine whether ICE agents are nearby. When they are, classroom doors are locked and hallways emptied until staff announce "all clear."

Similar tactics have been utilized by schools in other cities hit by immigration raids across the country. The Los Angeles Unified School District established a donation fund for affected families and created security perimeters around schools last summer.

But it appears nowhere have students felt the repercussions of local raids more than in Minneapolis.

Many schools have seen attendance plummet by double-digit percentages. At least three other, smaller charter schools in Minneapolis have completely shut down in-person learning.

At this high school, which administrators asked The Times not to identify for fear of retaliation by the Trump administration, 84 percent of students are Latino and 12 percent are Black. Staff and students are being identified by first or middle names.

Three students have been detained – and later released – in recent weeks. Two others were followed into the school parking lot and questioned about their immigration status. Several have parents who were deported or who self-deported. Latino staff said they have also been stopped and questioned about their legal status.

"Our families feel hunted," said Noelle, the school district's executive director.

■■■

Students returned from winter break on Jan. 6, the same day 2,000 additional immigration agents were dispatched to Minneapolis to carry out what Immigration and Customs Enforcement Acting Director Todd Lyons called the agency's "largest immigration operation ever." The next day, an ICE officer fatally shot Renee Good, a 37-year-old mother of three.

"I describe that day as if you're on an airplane and it's really bad turbulence, and you have to keep your cool because, if you don't, you lose the entire building," said Emmanuel, an assistant principal. "It felt like we went through war."

Attendance dropped by the hundreds as parents grew too afraid to let their children leave home. School leaders decided to offer online learning and scrambled to find enough laptops and mobile hotspots for the many students who didn't have devices or internet. Some teachers sent packets of schoolwork to students by mail.

Noelle said in-person attendance, which had dropped below 400 students, increased by around 100 in the third week of January. Then federal agents shot and killed 37-year-old intensive care nurse Alex Pretti, and attendance plummeted again.

Rochelle Van Dijk, vice president of Great MN Schools, a nonprofit supporting schools that serve a majority of students of color, said many schools have redirected tens of thousands of dollars away from other critical needs toward online learning, food distribution and safety planning. For students still attending in person, recess has frequently been canceled, and field trips and after-school activities paused.

Even if students return to school by mid-February, Van Dijk said, they will have missed 20 percent of their instructional days for the year.

"A senior who can't meet with their college counselor right now just missed support needed for major January college application deadlines. Or a second-grader with a speech delay who is supposed to be in an active in-person intervention may lose a critical window of brain plasticity," she said. "It is not dissimilar to what our nation's children faced during COVID, but entirely avoidable."

At the high school, administrators said they tried to create "a security bubble," operating under protocols more typical of active shooter emergencies.

If agents were to enter the building without a judicial warrant, the school would go into a full lockdown, turning off lights, staying silent and moving out of sight. That hasn't happened, though ICE last year rescinded a policy that had barred arrests at so-called sensitive locations, including schools.

Tricia McLaughlin, assistant secretary for the Department of Homeland Security, said that blaming ICE for low school attendance is "creating a climate of fear and smearing law enforcement."

"ICE does not target schools," McLaughlin said. "If a dangerous or violent illegal criminal alien felon were to flee into a school, or a child sex offender is working as an employee, there may be a situation where an arrest is made to protect the safety of the student. But this has not happened."

■■■

Alondra, a 16-year-old junior who was born in the U.S., was arrested after school Jan. 21 near a clinic where she had gone with a friend, also 16, to pick up medication for her grandmother.

She said that as she was about to turn into the parking lot, another car sped in front of her, forcing her to stop. Alondra saw four men in ski masks with guns get out. Scared, she put her car in reverse. Before she could move, she said, another vehicle pulled up and struck her car from behind.

Alondra shared videos with The Times that she recorded from the scene. She said agents cracked her passenger window in an attempt to get in.

"We're with you!" a bystander can be heard telling her in the video as others blow emergency whistles.

She said she rolled her window down and an agent asked to see her ID. She gave him her license and U.S. passport.

"Is it necessary to have to talk to you or can I talk to an actual cop?" she asks in the video. "Can I talk to an actual cop from here?"

"We are law enforcement," the agent replies. "What are they gonna do?"

In another video, an agent questions Alondra's friend about the whereabouts of his parents. Another agent is heard saying Alondra had put her car in reverse.

"We're underage," she tells him. "We're scared."

A Minneapolis Public Radio reporter at the scene said agents appeared to have rear-ended Alondra's car. But Alondra said an agent claimed she had caused the accident.

"It's just a simple accident, you know what I mean?" he says in the video. "We're not gonna get on you for trying to hit us or something."

"Can you let us go, please?" her friend, visibly shaken, asks the agent at his window.

Alondra and her friend were handcuffed and placed in a U.S. Customs and Border Protection vehicle as observers filmed the incident. At least two observers were arrested as agents deployed tear gas and pepper spray, according to an MPR report.

The agents took the students to the federal Whipple Building. Alondra said the agents separated the friends, looked through and photographed her belongings and had her change into blue canvas shoes before chaining her feet together and placing her in a holding cell alone.

"I asked at least five times if I could let my guardian know what was happening, because I was underage, but they never let me," she said.

Finally, around 7 p.m., agents released Alondra – with no paperwork about the incident – and she called her aunt to pick her up. Her friend was released later.

Meanwhile, school administrators who saw the MPR video called Alondra's family and her friend's.

Alondra said officers didn't know what had happened to her car and told her they would call her when she could pick it up. But no one has called, and school administrators who helped her make calls to Minneapolis impound lots haven't been able to locate it either.

Though Alondra could attend classes online, she felt she had to return to campus.

"I feel like if I would have stayed home, it would have gone worse for me," she said, her lip quivering. "I use school as a distraction."

■■■

The backstage of the auditorium, dubbed the bodega, has been turned into a well-stocked pantry for families who are too afraid to leave their homes.

Teachers and volunteers sort donations by category, including hygiene goods, breakfast cereals, bread and tortillas, fruit and vegetables, diapers and other baby items. Bags are labeled with each student's name and address and filled with the items their family has requested. After school, teachers deliver the items to the students' homes.

Noelle said some students, particularly those who are homeless, are now at risk of failing because they're in "survival mode." Their learning is stagnating, she said.

"A lot of these kids are – I mean, they want to be – college-bound," Noelle said. "How do you compete [for admission] with the best applicants if you're online right now and doing one touch-point a day with one teacher because that's all the technology that you have?"

On Thursday afternoon, 20 of 44 students had shown up for an AP world history class where the whiteboard prompt asked, "Why might some people resort to violent resistance rather than peaceful protest?"

Upstairs, in an 11th-grade U.S. history class, attendance was even worse – four students, with 17 others following online. The topic was what the teacher called the nation's "first immigration ban," the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

Morgan, the teacher, asked the students to name a similarity between the Chinese exclusion era and current day.

"Immigrants getting thrown out," one student offered.

"Once they leave, they can't come back," said another.

"The fact that this is our first ban on immigration also sets a precedent that this stuff can happen over and over and over again," Morgan said.

Sophie, who teachers English language learners, led the effort to organize the online school option. She is from Chile and says she has struggled to put her own fear aside to be present for the students who rely on her. Driving to school scares her, too.

"It's lawless," she said. "It doesn't matter that I have my passport in my purse. The minute I open my mouth, they're going to know that I'm not from here."

Sophie said she once had to call a student's mother to say her husband had been taken by immigration agents after another school staffer found his car abandoned on a nearby street.

"Having to have that conversation wasn't on my bingo card for that day, or any day," she said. "Having to say that we have proof that your husband was taken and hearing that woman crying and couldn't talk, and I'm like, what do I say now?"

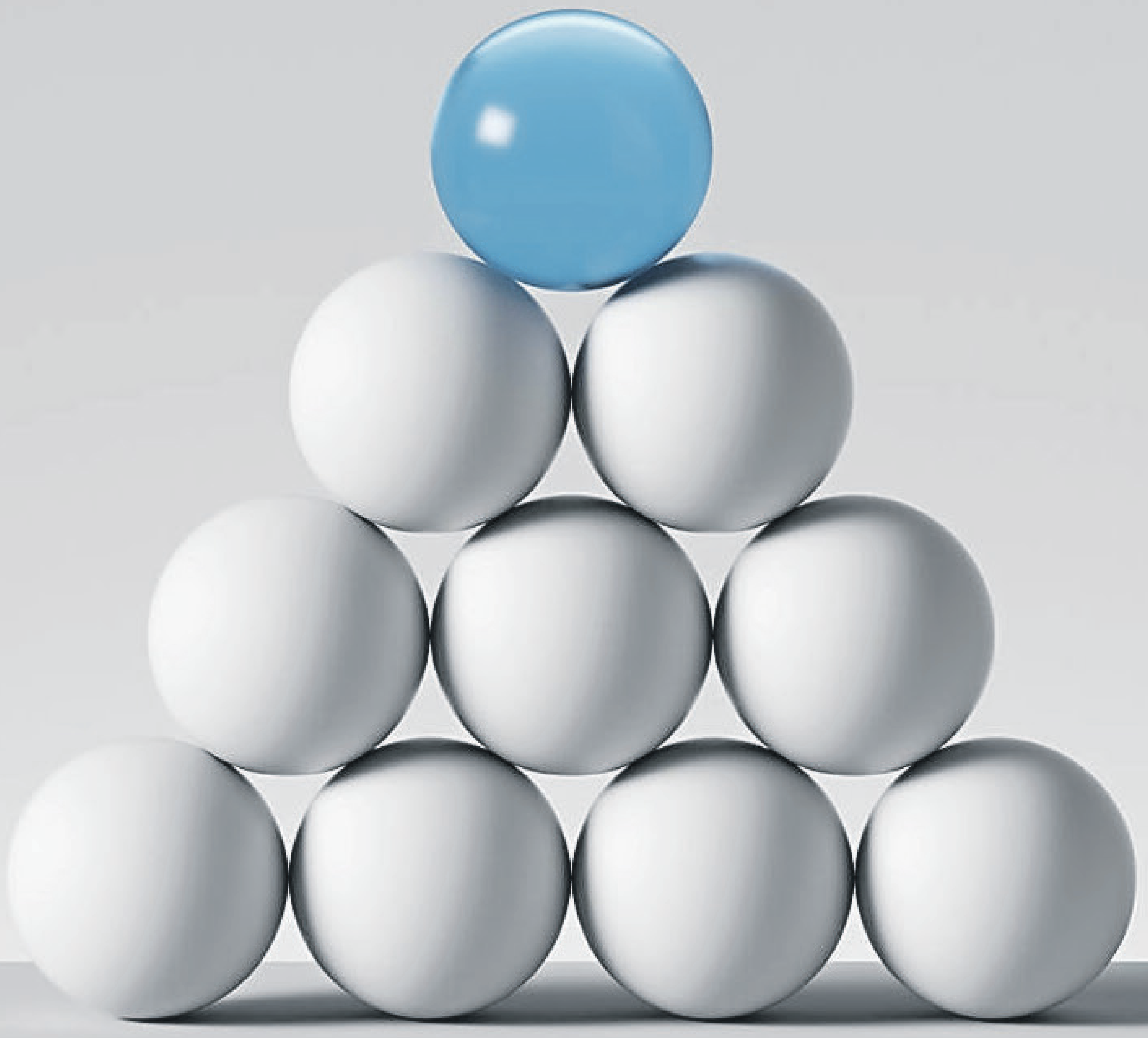
■■■

Close to the 4:15 p.m. dismissal, administrators again donned their neon vests and logged on to the neighborhood Signal call for possible immigration activity.

Dismissal used to be a free-for-all – once the final bell rang, students would rush outside to find their bus or ride or to begin the walk home.

Now pickups are staggered, with students escorted outside one bus at a time. Teachers grab numbered signs and tell students to line up according to their route. If ICE agents pull up, administrators said, they could rush a smaller group of students onto the bus or back inside.

In yet another example of how the immigration raids had crippled attendance, some buses were nearly empty. On one bus, just two students hopped on.



NeoLeo / Getty Images

# A human tendency to value expertise, not just sheer power, explains how some social hierarchies form

**By THOMAS MORGAN**
Associate Professor of Evolutionary Anthropology, Institute of Human Origins, Arizona State University
(The Conversation)

Born on the same day, Bill and Ben both grew up to have high status. But in every other way they were polar opposites.

As children, Bill was well-liked, with many friends, while Ben was a bully, picking on smaller kids. During adolescence, Bill earned a reputation for athleticism and intelligence. Ben, flanked by his henchmen, was seen as formidable and dangerous. In adulthood, Bill was admired for his decision-making and diplomacy, but Ben was feared for his aggression and intransigence.

People sought out Bill's company and listened to his advice. Ben was avoided, but he got his way through force.

How did Ben get away with this? Well, there's one more difference: Bill is a human, and Ben is a chimp.

This hypothetical story of Bill and Ben highlights a deep difference between human and animal social life. Many mammals exhibit dominance hierarchies; forms of inequality in which stronger individuals use strength, aggression and allies to get better access to food or mating opportunities.

Human societies are more peaceable but not necessarily more equal. We have hierarchies, too – leaders, captains and bosses. Does this mean we are no more than clothed apes, our domineering tendencies cloaked under superficial civility?

I'm an evolutionary anthropologist, part of a team of researchers who set out to come to grips with the evolutionary history of human social life and inequality.

Building on decades of discoveries, our work supports the idea that human societies are fundamentally different from those of other species. People can be coercive, but unlike other species, we also create hierarchies of prestige – voluntary arrangements that allocate labor and decision-making power according to expertise.

This tendency matters because it can inform how we, as a society, think about the kinds of social hierarchies that emerge in a workplace, on a sports team or across society more broadly. Prestige hierarchies can be steep, with clear differences between high and low status. But when they work well, they can form part of a healthy group life from which everyone benefits.

## Equal by nature?

Primate-style dominance hierarchies, along with the aggressive displays and fights that build them, are so alien to most humans that some researchers have concluded our species simply doesn't "do" hierarchy. Add to this the limited archaeological evidence for wealth differences prior to farming, and a picture emerges of humans as a peaceful and egalitarian species, at least until agriculture upended things 12,000 years ago.

But new evidence tells a more interesting story. Even the most egalitarian groups, such as the Ju/'hoansi and Hadza in Africa or Tsimané in South America, still show subtle inequalities in status, influence and power. And these differences matter: High-ranking men get their pick of partners, sometimes multiple partners, and go on to have more children. Archaeologists have also uncovered sites that display wealth differences even without agriculture.

So, are we more like other species than we might care to imagine, or is there still something different about human societies?

## Dominance and prestige

One oddity is in how human hierarchies form. In other animals, fighting translates physical strength into dominance. In humans, however, people often happily defer to leaders, even seeking them out. This deference creates hierarchies of prestige, not dominance.

Why do people do this? One current hypothesis is that we, uniquely, live in a world that relies on complex technologies, teaching and cooperation. In this world, expertise matters. Some people know how to build a kayak; others don't. Some people can organize a team to build a house; others need someone else to organize them. Some people are great hunters; others couldn't catch a cold.

In a world like this, everyone keeps an eye out for who has the skills and knowledge they need. Adept individuals can translate their ability into power and status. But, crucially, this status benefits everyone, not just the person on top.

That's the theory, but where's the evidence?

There are plenty of anthropological accounts of skillful people earning social status and bullies being quickly cut down. Lab studies have also found that people do keep an eye on how well others are doing, what they're good at, and even whom others are paying attention to, and they use this to guide their own information-seeking.

What my colleagues and I wanted to do was investigate how these everyday decisions might lead to larger-scale hierarchies of status and influence.

## From theory to practice

In a perfect world, we'd monitor whole societies for decades, mapping individual decisions to social consequences. In reality, this kind of study is impossible, so my team turned to a classic tool in evolutionary research: computer models. In place of real-world populations, we can build digital ones and watch their history play out in milliseconds instead of years.

In these simulated worlds, virtual people copied each other, watched whom others were learning from and accrued prestige. The setup was simple, but a clear pattern emerged: The stronger the tendency to seek out prestigious people, the steeper social influence hierarchies became.

Below a threshold, societies stayed mostly egalitarian; above it, they were led by a powerful few. In other words, "prestige psychology" – the mental machinery that guides whom people learn from – creates a societal tipping point.

The next step was to bring real humans into the lab and measure their tendency to follow prestigious leaders. This can tell us whether we, as a species, fall above or below the tipping point – that is, whether our psychology favors egalitarian or hierarchical groups.

To do this, my colleagues and I put participants into small groups and gave them problems to solve. We recorded whom participants listened to, and let them know whom their group mates were learning from, and we used this information to find the value of the human "hierarchy-forming" tendency. It was high – well above the tipping point for hierarchies to emerge, and our experimental groups ended up with clear leaders.

One doubt lingered: Our volunteers were from the modern United States. Can they really tell us about the whole human species?

Rather than repeat the study across dozens of cultures, we returned to modeling. This time, we let prestige psychology evolve. Each simulated person had their own tendency for how much they deferred to prestige. It guided their actions, affected their fitness and was passed on to their children with minor mutations.

Over thousands of generations, natural selection identified the most successful psychology: a sensitivity to prestige nearly identical to that we measured in real humans – and strong enough to produce the same sharp hierarchies.

## Inequality for everyone?

In other primates, being at the bottom of the social ladder can be brutal, with routine harassment and bullying by group mates. Thankfully, human prestige hierarchies look nothing like this. Even without any coercion, people often choose to follow skilled or respected individuals because good leadership makes life easier for everyone. Natural selection, it seems, has favored the psychology that makes this possible.

Of course, reality is messier than any model or lab experiment. Our simulations and experiment didn't allow for coercion or bullying, and so they give an optimistic view of how human societies might work – not how they do.

In the real world, leaders can selfishly abuse their authority or simply fail to deliver collective benefits. Even in our experiment, some groups rallied around below-average teammates, the snowballing tendency of prestige swamping signs of their poor ability. Leaders should always be held to account for the outcomes of their choices, and an evolutionary basis to prestige does not justify the oppression of the powerless by the powerful.

So hierarchies remain a double-edged sword. Human societies are unique in the benefits that hierarchies can bring to followers, but the old forces of dominance and exploitation have not disappeared. Still, the fact that natural selection favored a psychology that drives voluntary deference and powerful leaders suggests that, most of the time, prestige hierarchies are worth the risks. When they work well, we all reap the rewards.

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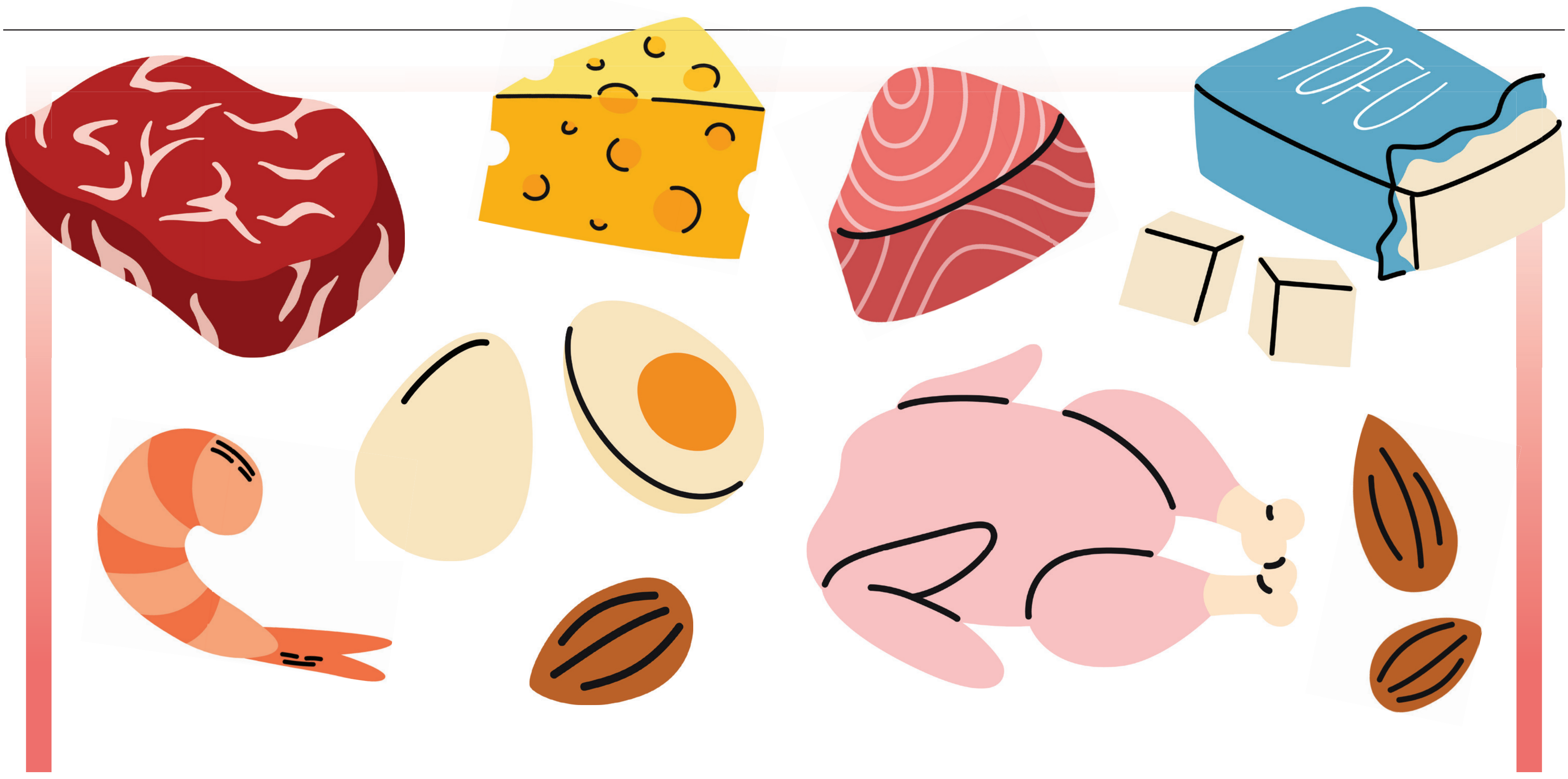


# Protein is all the rage

## but how much do you really need?

**By MEG WINGERTER**
The Denver Post (TNS)

Anna Moneymaker / Getty Images / TNS

U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. unveils the department's new dietary guidelines food chart during a policy announcement event at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on Jan. 8 in Washington, D.C.

DENVER – Protein is having a moment, with federal guidelines significantly raising the recommended amount people should eat every day and products ranging from coffee drinks to Pop-Tarts touting enhanced levels of the nutrient.

Eating enough protein is important for good health, Denver-area dieticians said, but people who want to increase their intake need to make sure they choose quality foods and don't crowd out healthy carbohydrates and fats.

Data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture showed that, as of 2020, the average American already ate enough protein to meet the new recommendations.

The most recent edition of the federal nutrition guidelines, released in early January, raised the recommended floor for protein consumption, setting a range from 50 percent higher to double the previous recommendation.

U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. also unveiled a flipped food pyramid, with beef and full-fat dairy among the foods to emphasize at the top. Federal recommendations had ditched the pyramid about 15 years ago for a model plate divided between produce, protein and whole grains.

The previous protein guideline was a bare minimum to avoid malnutrition, so raising that was probably the right call, said Jessica Crandall, a registered dietitian nutritionist who works at HCA HealthOne Rose.

Generally, Crandall recommends 60 to 80 grams of protein each day for women and 80 to 100 grams for men. For comparison, a three-ounce serving of ground beef has 22 grams, a skinless chicken breast has 18 grams and 6 ounces of Greek yogurt has 15 to 17 grams, according to Washington University in St. Louis.

But the right amount for any individual will depend on their body weight, age, level of physical activity and health, with some conditions requiring more protein and others demanding restrictions, Crandall said.

The International Food Information Council's 2024 Food and Health survey found about 71 percent of Americans were specifically trying to eat protein, up from 59 percent in 2022. About one in five said they specifically follow a "high protein" diet, making it more popular than calorie counting, low-carb or Mediterranean food plans.

People who work in nutrition have known about protein's importance to the muscles and immune system for quite some time, but public perception of it has changed significantly in recent years, said Kelly Elliot, a registered dietitian nutritionist at Saint Joseph Hospital.

"It's interesting how marketing sways the public and how the public sways marketing," she said.

While protein shakes and bars have been staples among the gym-going set for some time, other food brands are getting in on the game.

Snickers and Pop Tarts unveiled higher-protein options, and Thomas' bagels added a line about protein content to the front of the packaging for their existing products. Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts recently debuted drinks enhanced with whey protein, and Chipotle's menu now promotes a "protein cup" of chicken and a chicken taco, designed to offer a similar mix of protein, fat and carbs to a protein bar, said Stephanie Perdue, Chipotle's interim chief marketing officer.

"We've seen growing demand for protein-forward choices across more occasions, especially snack-sized portions at accessible prices," she said in a statement. "We'll carry this focus throughout 2026, with our culinary team driving protein-led innovation informed by customer behavior and emerging trends across our restaurants and digital channels."

As more people get the message that they need to increase their protein intake – despite the fact that most Americans already eat enough – food companies have responded by adding protein in unexpected places, including pretzels, chips and even bottled water, said William Hallman, a psychologist at Rutgers University who studies how people think about food.

Emphasizing protein creates a "health halo" around products that makes people think they're a better option, even if the manufacturer had to increase sugar and fat to mask the taste of protein powder, he said.

"Consumers think it's healthier for them, and that's the problem," he said.

Brands highlight the positive aspects of their food, but that doesn't mean that every high-protein product is a good choice, Elliot said. Consumers need to consider other factors such as sugar and saturated fat content, and whether the ingredients list includes a string of additives, she said.

The new nutrition guidelines also warned the public to avoid added sugars and ultra-processed foods, while maintaining the existing advice to limit saturated fat for heart disease prevention.

"Some of these protein bars, many of them are glorified candy bars," she said.

The new nutrition guidelines may encourage products to continue jumping on the protein bandwagon, but in the long run, food companies will have to consider whether the costs of fortifying their products are worthwhile in an increasingly crowded marketplace, Hallman said.

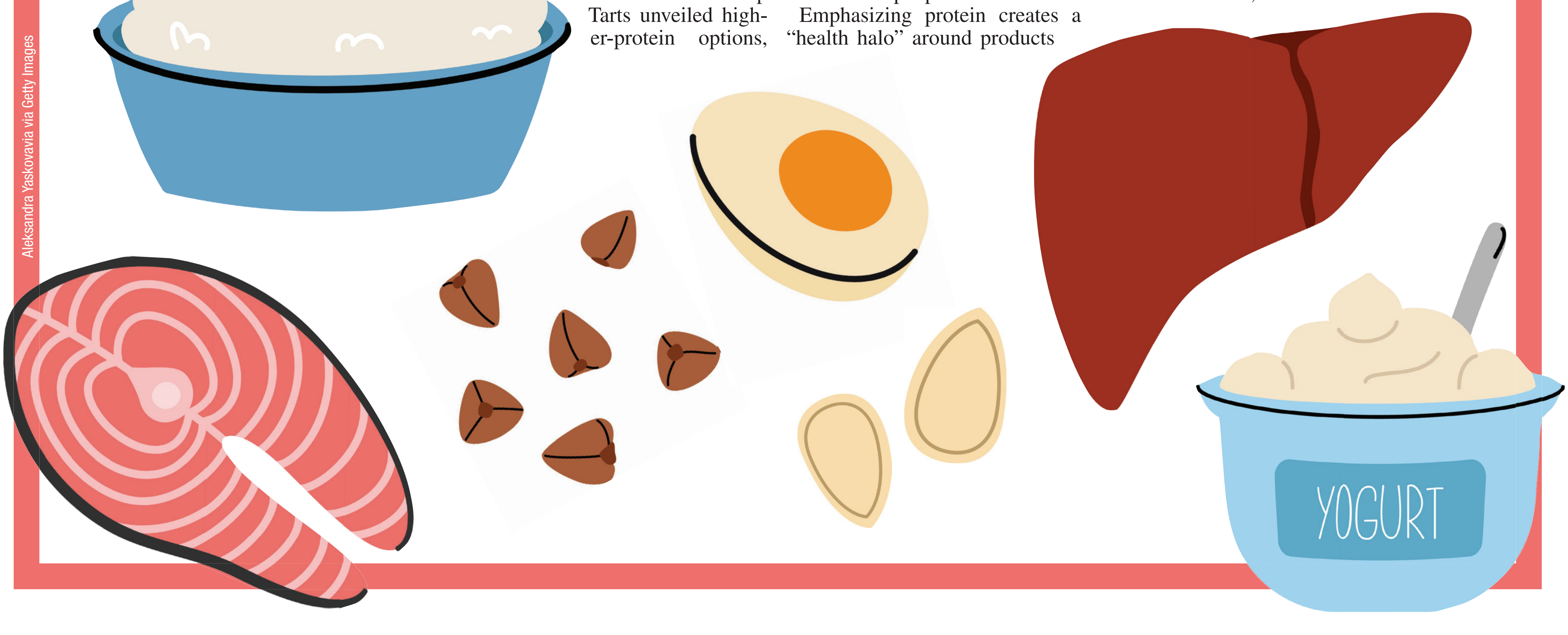
"At some point, people are going to figure out they're getting plenty of protein," he said.

Most people will be able to meet their needs as long as they have a good source of protein at each meal, alongside fruits, vegetables and whole grains, Crandall said. While most people think of meat when discussing protein, other options with less saturated fat include eggs, dairy foods, seafood, nuts, seeds and beans, she said.

"Protein is one piece of the puzzle," she said.

For most people, eating more protein than they need isn't likely to cause a problem, though it can exacerbate kidney or liver disease. The concern is that they'll forgo foods that are low in protein but high in fiber or vitamins and minerals that also contribute to good health, Crandall said.

"Sometimes when we hyper-focus on one area … we miss out on those other nutrients," she said.



Aleksandra Yaskovavia Getty Images

# Confused by the new dietary guidelines?

## Focus on these simple, evidence-based shifts to lower your chronic disease risk

**By MICHAEL I GORAN**
University of Southern California
(The Conversation)

THE CONVERSATION

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans aim to translate the most up-to-date nutrition science into practical advice for the public as well as to guide federal policy for programs such as school lunches.

But the newest version of the guidelines, released on Jan. 7, 2026, seems to be spurring more confusion than clarity about what people should be eating.

I've been studying nutrition and chronic disease for over 35 years, and in 2020 I wrote "Sugarproof," a book about reducing consumption of added sugars to improve health. I served as a scientific adviser for the new guidelines.

I chose to participate in this process, despite its accelerated and sometimes controversial nature, for two reasons. First, I wanted to help ensure the review was conducted with scientific rigor. And second, federal health officials prioritized examining areas where the evidence has become especially strong – particularly food processing, added sugars and sugary beverages, which closely aligns with my research.

My role, along with colleagues, was to review and synthesize that evidence and help clarify where the science is strongest and most consistent.

### What's different in the new dietary guidelines?

The dietary guidelines, first published in 1980, are updated every five years. The newest version differs from the previous versions in a few key ways.

For one thing, the new report is shorter, at nine pages rather than 400. It offers simpler advice directly to the public, whereas previous guidelines were more directed at policymakers and nutrition experts.

Also, the new guidelines reflect an important paradigm shift in defining a healthy diet. For the past half-century, dietary advice has been shaped by a focus on general dietary patterns and targets for individual nutrients, such as protein, fat and carbohydrate. The new guidelines instead emphasize overall diet quality.

Some health and nutrition experts have criticized specific aspects of the guidelines, such as how the current administration developed them, or how they address saturated fat, beef, dairy, protein and alcohol intake. These points have dominated the public discourse. But while some of them are valid, they risk overshadowing the strongest, least controversial and most actionable conclusions from the scientific evidence.

What we found in our scientific assessment was that just a few straightforward changes to your diet – specifically, reducing highly processed foods and sugary drinks, and increasing whole grains – can meaningfully improve your health.

### What the evidence actually shows

My research assistants and I evaluated the conclusions of studies on consuming sugar, highly processed foods and whole grains, and assessed how well they were conducted and how likely they were to be biased. We graded the overall quality of the findings as low, moderate or high based on standardized criteria such as their consistency and plausibility.

We found moderate to high quality evidence that people who eat higher amounts of processed foods have a higher risk of developing Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, dementia and death from any cause.

Similarly, we found moderately solid evidence that people who drink more sugar-sweetened beverages have a higher risk of obesity and Type 2 diabetes, as well as quite conclusive evidence that children who drink fruit juice have a higher risk of obesity. And consuming more beverages containing artificial sweeteners raises the risk of death from any cause and Alzheimer's disease, based on moderately good evidence.

Whole grains, on the other hand, have a protective effect on health. We found high-quality evidence that people who eat more whole grains have a lower risk of cardiovascular disease and death from any cause. People who consume more dietary fiber, which is abundant in whole grains, have a lower risk of Type 2 diabetes and death from any cause, based on moderate-quality research.

According to the research we evaluated, it's these aspects – too much highly processed foods and sweetened beverages, and too little whole grain foods – that are significantly contributing to the epidemic of chronic diseases such as obesity, Type 2 diabetes and heart disease in this country – and not protein, beef or dairy intake.

### From scientific evidence to guidelines

Our report was the first one to recommend that the guidelines explicitly mention decreasing consumption of highly processed foods. Overall, though, research on the negative health effects of sugar and processed foods and the beneficial effects of whole grains has been building for many years and has been noted in previous reports.

On the other hand, research on how strongly protein, red meat, saturated fat and dairy are linked with chronic disease risk is much less conclusive. Yet the 2025 guidelines encourage increasing consumption of those foods – a change from previous versions.

The inverted pyramid imagery used to represent the 2025 guidelines also emphasizes protein – specifically, meat and dairy – by putting these foods in a highly prominent spot in the top left corner of the image. Whole grains sit at the very bottom; and except for milk, beverages are not represented.

Scientific advisers were not involved in designing the image.

### Making small changes that can improve your health

An important point we encountered repeatedly in reviewing the research was that even small dietary changes could meaningfully lower people's chronic disease risks.

For example, consuming just 10 percent fewer calories per day from highly processed foods could lower the risk of diabetes by 14 percent, according to one of the lead studies we relied on for the evidence review. Another study showed that eating one less serving of highly processed foods per day lowers the risk of heart disease by 4 percent.

You can achieve that simply by switching from a highly processed packaged bread to one with fewer ingredients or replacing one fast-food meal per week with a simple home-cooked meal. Or, switch your preferred brands of daily staples such as tomato sauce, yogurt, salad dressing, crackers and nut butter to ones that have fewer ingredients like added sugars, sweeteners, emulsifiers and preservatives.

Cutting down on sugary beverages – for example, soda, sweet teas, juices and energy drinks – had an equally dramatic effect. Simply drinking the equivalent of one can less per day lowers the risk of diabetes by 26 percent and the risk of heart disease by 14 percent.

And eating just one additional serving of whole grains per day – say, replacing packaged bread with whole grain bread – results in an 18 percent lower risk of diabetes and a 13 percent lower risk of death from all causes combined.

### How to adopt 'kitchen processing'

Another way to make these improvements is to take basic elements of food processing back from manufacturers and return them to your own kitchen – what I call "kitchen processing." Humans have always processed food by chopping, cooking, fermenting, drying or freezing. The problem with highly processed foods isn't just the industrial processing that transforms the chemical structure of natural ingredients, but also what chemicals are added to improve taste and shelf life.

Kitchen processing, though, can instead be optimized for health and for your household's flavor preferences – and you can easily do it without cooking from scratch. Here are some simple examples:

Instead of flavored yogurts, buy plain yogurt and add your favorite fruit or some homemade simple fruit compote.

Instead of sugary or diet beverages, use a squeeze of citrus or even a splash of juice to flavor plain sparkling water.

Start with a plain whole grain breakfast cereal and add your own favorite source of fiber and/or fruit.

Instead of packaged "energy bars" make your own preferred mixture of nuts, seeds and dried fruit.

Instead of bottled salad dressing, make a simple one at home with olive oil, vinegar or lemon juice, a dab of mustard and other flavorings of choice, such as garlic, herbs, or honey.

You can adapt this way of thinking to the foods you eat most often by making similar types of swaps. They may seem small, but they will build over time and have an outsized effect on your health.

*Michael I Goran is a professor of pediatrics and vice chair for research at the University of Southern California. The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts.* *This article is republished under a Creative Commons license.* *Read the original article at https://theconversation.com.*

Photo: Liudmila Chernetska via Getty Images

**ASK THE PEDIATRICIAN**

# Tips to keep kids warm and safe when playing outside in winter

**By LOIS LEE, MD, MPH, FAAP**
American Academy of Pediatrics (TNS)

Heading outside for some wintertime fun like sledding, throwing snowballs or ice skating can be a sure-fire cure for cabin fever. It's also a great way for kids to get the 60 minutes of daily exercise they need. Just be sure your child is dressed right – and know when it's time to come in and warm up.

Families can also prevent winter-related injuries, whether that means supervising a sledding expedition or helping keep children off thin ice. Here are some tips on keeping children safe:

## Cold weather

Children are more at risk from cold outdoor temperatures than adults. Because their bodies are smaller, they lose heat more quickly. Especially if they're having fun, they may not realize how cold they are and may be less likely to come inside when they're getting too cold.

To prevent frostbite and hypothermia, make sure the temperature, including how it feels with the wind chill, is above -15 degrees Fahrenheit. At these temperatures, exposed skin begins to freeze within minutes. Wearing several thin layers of clothing will help keep kids warm and dry. Insulated boots, mittens or gloves, and a hat are also essential. Make sure children change out of any wet clothes right away.

To make sure children aren't exposed for too long, set reasonable limits on the amount of time spent playing outside to prevent hypothermia and frostbite. Make sure kids have a place to go for regular indoor breaks to warm up. And reward them with a healthy and delicious snack.

## Winter activities

Building snow forts and snow tunnels requires supervision in case of collapse. Supervision also ensures opening(s) are available for exiting. If the snow fort or tunnel collapses, the supervising individual is available to extricate children who may get trapped inside. When building the fort, avoid the use of sharp tools.

Ice skating is another fun winter activity that can prove hazardous. Allow children to skate only on approved frozen surfaces that have been checked to ensure the ice is thick enough. Check for signs posted by local police or recreation departments or call your local police department to find out which areas have been approved.

Be sure to advise your child to skate in the same direction as the crowd and avoid darting across the ice and to never skate alone. It's also prudent to make sure children aren't eating or chewing gum while skating due to the choking hazard. Parents with further concerns can elect to have their child wear a helmet, knee pads and elbow pads. This can be especially helpful while learning to skate to keep them safe from serious head injury or broken bones.

Supervised sledding is another fantastic outdoor recreation idea, but safety steps should be taken to ensure sledders are away from large objects such as vehicles or trees that could be crashed into. Equipment safety is important as well; sleds should be free of sharp corners or edges with well-lubricated steering mechanisms. Sleds with steering capabilities are safer than simple disks or inner tubes that don't allow for much control. Safety padding and helmets should be used to prevent serious injury and trusted adults should always be watching.

Safety can look very similar when it comes to skiing or snowboarding: Adult supervision is always encouraged on top of general safety equipment such as helmets and goggles that are also tested for fit to ensure they work properly. Additionally, children should be taught how to engage in either sport before taking to the slopes, ideally by a qualified instructor in a program designed for children. If their school offer a ski/snowboard club, this could be a good first step to getting them comfortable.

Snowmobiling has its own host of dangers and as such, the AAP recommends that children under age 16 not operate snowmobiles – just like they can't operate a car – and that children under age 6 never ride on snowmobiles. Sledding or skiing with a snowmobile is not safe or recommended. Usual safety precautions, such as helmet and google wearing, should be enforced. Traveling at safe speeds and only during daylight hours on marked trails is also recommended.

For more information, go to HealthyChildren.org.

*Lois Lee, MD, MPH, FAAP, Chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Injury, Violence and Poison Prevention, is a pediatric emergency medicine physician at Boston Children's Hospital and Associate Professor of Pediatrics and Emergency Medicine at Harvard Medical School.*

Sergey Novikov / Dreamstime / TNS

Heading outside for some wintertime fun like sledding, throwing snowballs or ice skating can be a a great way for kids to get the 60 minutes of daily exercise they need.

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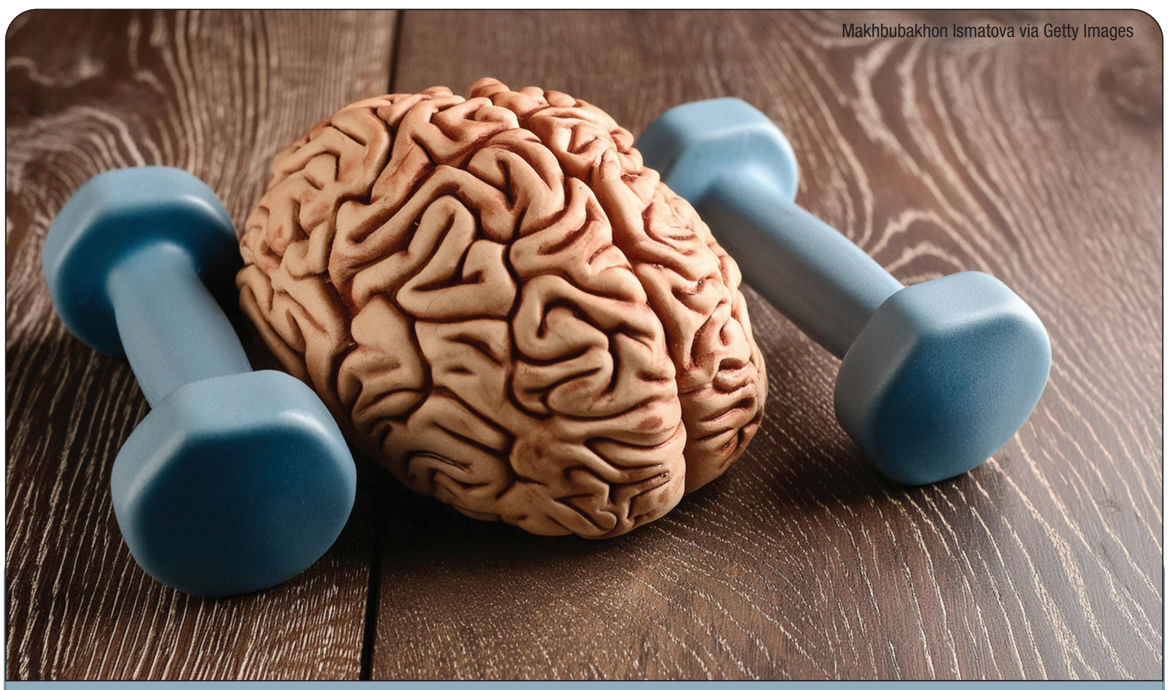

Makhbubakhon Ismatova via Getty Images

# Your brain can be trained, much like your muscles

## A neurologist explains how to boost your brain health

**By JOANNA FONG-ISARIYAWONGSE**
University of Pittsburgh (The Conversation)

If you have ever lifted a weight, you know the routine: challenge the muscle, give it rest, feed it and repeat. Over time, it grows stronger.

Of course, muscles only grow when the challenge increases over time. Continually lifting the same weight the same way stops working.

It might come as a surprise to learn that the brain responds to training in much the same way as our muscles, even though most of us never think about it that way. Clear thinking, focus, creativity and good judgment are built through challenge, when the brain is asked to stretch beyond routine rather than run on autopilot. That slight mental discomfort is often the sign that the brain is actually being trained, a lot like that good workout burn in your muscles.

Think about walking the same loop through a local park every day. At first, your senses are alert. You notice the hills, the trees, the changing light. But after a few loops, your brain checks out. You start planning dinner, replaying emails or running through your to-do list. The walk still feels good, but your brain is no longer being challenged.

Routine feels comfortable, but comfort and familiarity alone do not build new brain connections.

As a neurologist who studies brain activity, I use electroencephalograms, or EEGs, to record the brain's electrical patterns.

Research in humans shows that these rhythms are remarkably dynamic. When someone learns a new skill, EEG rhythms often become more organized and coordinated. This reflects the brain's attempt to strengthen pathways needed for that skill.

### Your brain trains in zones too

For decades, scientists believed that the brain's ability to grow and reorganize, called neuroplasticity, was largely limited to childhood. Once the brain matured, its wiring was thought to be largely fixed.

But that idea has been overturned. Decades of research show that adult brains can form new connections and reorganize existing networks, under the right conditions, throughout life.

Some of the most influential work in this field comes from enriched environment studies in animals. Rats housed in stimulating environments filled with toys, running wheels and social interaction developed larger, more complex brains than rats kept in standard cages. Their brains adapted because they were regularly exposed to novelty and challenge.

Human studies find similar results. Adults who take on genuinely new challenges, such as learning a language, dancing or practicing a musical instrument, show measurable increases in brain volume and connectivity on MRI scans.

The takeaway is simple: Repetition keeps the brain running, but novelty pushes the brain to adapt, forcing it to pay attention, learn and problem-solve in new ways. Neuroplasticity thrives when the brain is nudged just beyond its comfort zone.

### The reality of neural fatigue

Just like muscles, the brain has limits. It does not get stronger from endless strain. Real growth comes from the right balance of challenge and recovery.

When the brain is pushed for too long without a break – whether that means long work hours, staying locked onto the same task or making nonstop decisions under pressure – performance starts to slip. Focus fades. Mistakes increase. To keep you going, the brain shifts how different regions work together, asking some areas to carry more of the load. But that extra effort can still make the whole network run less smoothly.

Neural fatigue is more than feeling tired. Brain imaging studies show that during prolonged mental work, the networks responsible for attention and decision-making begin to slow down, while regions that promote rest and reward-seeking take over. This shift helps explain why mental exhaustion often comes with stronger cravings for quick rewards, like sugary snacks, comfort foods or mindless scrolling. The result is familiar: slower thinking, more mistakes, irritability and mental fog.

This is where the muscle analogy becomes especially useful. You wouldn't do squats for six hours straight, because your leg muscles would eventually give out. As they work, they build up byproducts that make each contraction a little less effective until you finally have to stop. Your brain behaves in a similar way.

Likewise, in the brain, when the same cognitive circuits are overused, chemical signals build up, communication slows and learning stalls.

But rest allows those strained circuits to reset and function more smoothly over time. And taking breaks from a taxing activity does not interrupt learning. In fact, breaks are critical for efficient learning.

### The crucial importance of rest

Among all forms of rest, sleep is the most powerful.

Sleep is the brain's night shift. While you rest, the brain takes out the trash through a special cleanup system called the glymphatic system that clears away waste and harmful proteins. Sleep also restores glycogen, a critical fuel source for brain cells.

And importantly, sleep is when essential repair work happens. Growth hormone surges during deep sleep, supporting tissue repair. Immune cells regroup and strengthen their activity.

During REM sleep, the stage of sleep linked to dreaming, the brain replays patterns from the day to consolidate memories. This process is critical not only for cognitive skills like learning an instrument but also for physical skills like mastering a move in sports.

On the other hand, chronic sleep deprivation impairs attention, disrupts decision-making and alters the hormones that regulate appetite and metabolism. This is why fatigue drives sugar cravings and late-night snacking.

Sleep is not an optional wellness practice. It is a biological requirement for brain performance.

### Exercise feeds the brain too

Exercise strengthens the brain as well as the body.

Physical activity increases levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, or BDNF, a protein that acts like fertilizer for neurons. It promotes the growth of new connections, increases blood flow, reduces inflammation and helps the brain remain adaptable across one's lifespan.

This is why exercise is one of the strongest lifestyle tools for protecting cognitive health.

### Train, recover, repeat

The most important lesson from this science is simple. Your brain is not passively wearing down with age. It is constantly remodeling itself in response to how you use it. Every new challenge and skill you try, every real break, every good night of sleep sends a signal that growth is still expected.

You do not need expensive brain training programs or radical lifestyle changes. Small, consistent habits matter more. Try something unfamiliar. Vary your routines. Take breaks before exhaustion sets in. Move your body. Treat sleep as nonnegotiable.

So the next time you lace up your shoes for a familiar walk, consider taking a different path. The scenery may change only slightly, but your brain will notice. That small detour is often all it takes to turn routine into training.

The brain stays adaptable throughout life. Cognitive resilience is not fixed at birth or locked in early adulthood. It is something you can shape.

If you want a sharper, more creative, more resilient brain, you do not need to wait for a breakthrough drug or a perfect moment. You can start now, with choices that tell your brain that growth is still the plan.

*Joanna Fong-Isariyawongse is an associate professor of neurology at the University of Pittsburgh. The Conversation is an independent and nonprofit source of news, analysis and commentary from academic experts. This article is republished under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article at https://theconversation.com.*

# FINANCE

# Unemployed and uninsured

## The gamble of going without health insurance to save money

**By LINDA BELL**
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Dreamstime / TNS

Losing a job can feel like a one-two punch: the loss of both income and health insurance.

Sixty percent of Americans under age 65 – that's about 164.7 million people – receive their health insurance through their employer, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation analysis. That means losing a job can feel like a one-two punch: the loss of both income and health insurance.

Then comes the choice. Even with the loss of a paycheck, do you find a way to stay protected through traditional health insurance with its high monthly premiums, large deductibles and out-of-pocket costs? Or do you save money, take a chance and skip traditional coverage?

Marcos Bello faced that choice last year. After being laid off in 2025, Bello found himself with just days of employer-sponsored coverage left and a decision to make about how or whether to insure himself next.

To cut costs and bridge the gap after a layoff, Bello and some other Americans are turning to non-traditional health care options like short-term health care plans, direct primary care and health care sharing ministries. These plans can offer short-term savings, but experts warn they may leave consumers exposed to denied claims, coverage gaps and significant financial risk if serious illness or injury strikes.

In 2023, more than 25 million people below age 65 were uninsured, according to the KFF. Of those people who make the conscious choice to go without insurance, the group is often younger, relatively healthy individuals, says Michael Botta, president of Sesame, a health care marketplace.

"I would never tell somebody you should go without health insurance because a backstop in case of emergency is really important," says Botta. "Bad things happen. Emergencies happen. When you're young and healthy, you feel pretty indestructible, but one wrong move can be financially and medically devastating."

Even so, some Americans are choosing savings over security.

### Choosing to go uninsured

2025 was a brutal year for workers, with layoffs surpassing more than 1.2 million and health insurance premiums continuing to climb. Against that backdrop, Bello made the calculated decision to go without traditional health insurance after his layoff.

Although Bello was only given 10 days of coverage after the layoff, it wasn't an impulsive choice. The 33-year-old performed a cost–benefit analysis, weighing the price of insurance against the risks of going without it. A key part of his research included uncovering alternative ways to access care, like community clinics and cash pay. (More on those later).

"I was a little more cautious. I wasn't trying to be out skiing or doing anything dangerous. I was conscious even in the gym," Bello says. Still, he describes his choice as liberating. "I really felt empowered just knowing all of a sudden, my monthly and quarterly outlay for my medication and health care just got cheaper immediately."

### Declining COBRA coverage

The Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, known as COBRA, allows workers to temporarily keep the same insurance they had while working.

Bello had been down the COBRA road before, first signing up for the program after a 2022 layoff and prompted by a late-night emergency room visit for a severe allergic reaction. Concerned about going without coverage, he enrolled before the 60-day window ended. Soon, the cost became hard for him to stomach.

"Before the separation, I was paying $250 every other week out of my pre-tax paycheck, something you don't really feel as an individual," he says. "What my employer was covering is now on me. Now I need to pay $1,000 a month."

When Bello experienced layoff number two in 2025, the memory of the late-night emergency room visit lingered, but the $1,000-a-month COBRA bill loomed larger. One thing he was sure of: He wasn't signing up for COBRA again.

COBRA can make sense for people with chronic conditions who need continuity of care. However, according to an analysis by the Commonwealth Fund, only about 9 percent of laid-off workers enroll in COBRA coverage. The biggest reason they skip it is the cost.

With COBRA, you won't find subsidies or financial assistance like you can with Affordable Care Act (ACA) marketplace plans. Monthly premiums can also be up to six times higher than what people were paying when employed. On average, that can range from $400 to $700 per person, and even more for families.

"There's real sticker shock," says John Hargraves, managing director of data strategy and analytics at the Healthcare Cost Institute. "You're suddenly paying the full premium yourself. There's no employer subsidy anymore. On top of that, there's usually a [2 percent] administrative fee. So that's increasing the premium that the person is going to pay."

### Turning to medical cost-sharing plans

Going without traditional health insurance doesn't necessarily mean going without any kind of coverage. Medical cost-sharing plans, while not health insurance, are an alternative way for people to pay their medical bills.

Also known as health care sharing ministries (HCSMs) or health care sharing plans, members contribute monthly to a pool to help pay each other's eligible medical expenses. Depending on the plan, your monthly cost could be as low as $100 a month or less.

For Kirby Wilson, health care sharing ministries have been a godsend. When the 41-year-old single woman was laid off from her airline job in 2024 and 2025, she was shocked that COBRA would cost $738 a month. Fortunately, she worked part-time for a company that offers HCSM plans and only has to pay $138 for discounted care – a huge relief for her budget.

"If I were basing this on what I could afford, health care wasn't something that I was going to be able to get," she says.

While medical cost-sharing plans can offer value for some people, experts say there are real risks. According to the Commonwealth Fund, in 2023, the plans had more than $230 million in unpaid claims. That's because some plans have strict rules that disallow reimbursement for various types of care, including substance use disorders, preexisting conditions and preventative care.

"They're often cheaper than insurance. But one of the reasons they're cheaper is that there's no guarantee that they have to pay your bills," says Botta. "They can say to you, 'The pool is out of money. There's not enough money left to pay for expenses this year.' Or they could say it was your lifestyle that caused that injury, or that there is no contract. There is no obligation for them, ultimately, to pay your bills."

### Utilizing short-term health or fixed indemnity plans

If you're in between jobs or only need basic coverage for a short period of time, short-term plans can be a lifeline. While available in only 36 states as of writing, these plans are typically sold for terms of one to six months, though some insurers offer longer periods, according to the KFF.

The cost depends on factors like where you live, your age and other criteria, and plans can start around $100 a month. But in exchange for those lower premiums, you have less comprehensive coverage and fewer consumer protections, including the inability to renew coverage when the policy ends.

Similarly, fixed-indemnity or hospital insurance plans are cheaper than traditional insurance, with premiums as low as $25 a month. Intended as supplemental insurance, they pay a set amount for out-of-pocket expenses, such as a hospital stay or surgery. A 2021 Commonwealth Fund report warned that these plans are being sold to consumers as comprehensive coverage when they only offer limited benefits.

"The challenge is, there's no guarantee it's going to pay the entirety of the bills that you receive," says Botta. "A hospital stay, unfortunately, is far more expensive than people often realize, at least the sticker price is when you get a bill."

### Accessing community clinics or direct primary care

For people without insurance, community health centers and direct primary care can cover many everyday health needs without breaking the bank.

After his second layoff, Bello identified community health centers in his area that provided primary care and preventive services, regardless of insurance status. Community clinics typically offer low-cost care on a sliding scale based on your family size and income. Some people can receive care at no charge if they can't afford to pay.

"I had no question marks about where I can get care," Bello says. "I had no question marks about what my medication is going to cost or if I'm going to get my medication. All of those things went away."

Bello's extensive research also included direct primary care practices. For a fee of $100 a month or less, DPCs give you unlimited access to a primary care provider.

"It is a way for you to pay a reliable amount every month for continuity of care," says Botta. "You can see a DPC doctor and get care for regular, routine things." Depending on the practice, that may include basic lab work, telehealth visits, mental health care and more. In addition to the membership fee, you will have to pay out of pocket for these services, though the DPC clinic may offer wholesale pricing.

Still, DPCs have limitations. Clinics are not available in all areas. Additionally, specialty medicine and certain procedures are typically not covered.

"The challenge is that there isn't a network," says Botta. "Also, if a DPC doctor says, 'I feel a lump on you,' that DPC membership isn't going to pay for a biopsy, an MRI, or a specialist visit. You have to navigate the rest of the health care system on your own."

### Using payment assistance programs and cash pay options

Rising medical bills are an ongoing concern for Americans. For those without insurance, the financial worries are even greater. The good news is that medical costs are not as fixed as they seem.

"They [providers] might offer you payment plans or might offer you access cards," says Itzak Cohen, CEO and co-founder of PayZen, a health care company that uses AI to make medical bills more affordable for patients and providers. "They might offer you financial assistance. The problem is that there's so much cynicism and fear and, quite frankly, anger from patients around paying medical bills that the first response is to just ignore it. But ignoring it is not going to make the problem go away."

Bello found that being upfront about being uninsured made a difference, especially at pharmacies. "Once I clarified I was paying cash, the pharmacist applied a coupon and the same medication was more affordable, versus my old insurance."

For labwork, imaging, dentistry and some basic procedures, Bello called ahead and asked for self-pay pricing. "In several cases, paying cash was cheaper than insured rates," he says. Bello also requested financial assistance and sliding-scale fees. "I asked hospitals and providers about charity care and income-based programs. Eligibility thresholds were higher than I expected, including for some mental health practices."

Still, cash pay may only go so far, especially if your finances are tight after a layoff.

"Insurance is really for the more catastrophic events," says Hargraves. "The typical cost of a hospitalization is tens of thousands of dollars. Sure, cash pay works for all the low-cost, highly used services, but it's not really going to work for those less common, very high-cost services."

### Living with the ramifications of going without health insurance

Whether it's a health care ministry or a fixed indemnity plan, the bulk of these strategies have one thing in common: They offer lower monthly expenses but also carry risk.

"It may be an economical choice based on the upfront price. But in terms of the protection it gives you, the value is just not there," says Sarah Collins, senior scholar for the Commonwealth Fund. "You may get some of your costs covered, but it's not going to cover you for the big risk that health care can present to people, such as unexpected illness and unexpected accidents."

The real dangers with these alternatives are being uninsured and delaying care, says Kirat Kharode, CEO of HealCo, a firm that helps employers lower costs by providing access to direct care.

"People need to understand that they didn't just pick up something that they thought was the full, catastrophic, best version of whatever [insurance] they had before," he says. "And now they're thinking that they have the same thing because they picked up a [health care] ministry option or something like that."

Karode also warns of the risk of getting trapped in debt, especially during periods of unemployment and reduced income. "It's balancing the decision and walking with awareness."

Bello went seven months without traditional health insurance coverage before landing a job in September 2025… one with employer-sponsored insurance. Looking back, he understands the risk he took. However, Bello says the key is understanding your options and deciding how much uncertainty you can live with.

"I think it's all about the question marks," he says. "It's your responsibility to say, 'How many of these question marks can I erase from my life and keep moving forward?' I navigated almost a year without having to pay for expensive [health] care. I made it through. I'm alive."

*Visit Bankrate online at bankrate.com.*

### Health care coverage comparisons

*Going without traditional health insurance is a big decision. We've put together a chart summarizing some of the most common health care alternatives and lower-cost insurance options – including typical costs, enrollment periods and more.*

| Plan Type | Typical Monthly Cost (Individual) | Enrollment Window | What It Covers | Key Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| COBRA | $400–$700 per person | Up to 60 days after job-based coverage ends | Same employer health plan you already had | Very expensive; no subsidies; temporary coverage from 18-36 months |
| Short-term medical plans | Starting around $100/month | Varies by state; often year-round | Limited major medical coverage | Not ACA-compliant; can deny pre-existing conditions; benefit caps; not allowed in some states; intended to be temporary |
| Fixed indemnity plans | Starting around $25/month | Year-round | Pays fixed dollar amounts per service or per day | Not real insurance; no out-of-pocket maximum; benefits often far below actual costs; best used only as a supplement |
| Medical cost-sharing plans | About $100/month or less | Year-round | Members share eligible medical bills | Not insurance; no guarantee of payment; often excludes pre-existing conditions and certain services |
| Direct Primary Care (DPC) | $100/month or less | Year-round | Unlimited primary care visits and basic labs via membership | Not insurance; does not cover hospitals, specialists, or emergencies; usually paired with other coverage |
| Cash pay (no insurance) | $0 monthly premium | N/A | Pay providers directly at the time of care | Very high financial risk for emergencies; no protection from large or catastrophic bills |
| ACA Bronze Plan | Can be close to $0 if income is 150 percent below the poverty level | Special enrollment after job loss, usually up to 60 days | Full ACA-compliant major medical coverage | High deductibles; subsidies are income-based |
| Medicaid | Low or no premium (based on income) | Special enrollment; typically up to 60 days after losing your job | Comprehensive low-cost coverage | For reduced-cost coverage, household income can't exceed 138 percent of the federal poverty level; must also live in one of the 40 Medicaid expansion states |

Ozgur Coskun / Dreamstime / TNS

# 3 SOUPS THAT WILL TAKE THE CHILL OFF

**By MEREDITH DEEDS and CONNOR DEEDS**
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

When the temperature dips and dinner needs to happen fast – or a bowl of comfort is in order – a pot of soup can feel like a small miracle.

But just 30 minutes on the stove is all it takes to coax big flavors out of humble ingredients, especially when you lean on smart techniques and strategic shortcuts. These three soup recipes deliver comfort without the wait, and come with three lessons in making weeknight cooking easier and more delicious.

**1. Make it creamy without the cream**

A velvety smooth white bean soup can achieve a luxurious creaminess without the cream, and the secret lies in the blending. Turning a hot liquid into a pureed soup requires a little know-how. In a blender, steam from a hot liquid can rapidly expand, causing the blender lid to fly off and the fiery contents to splatter all over the cook and the kitchen. Luckily, the fix is easy: Fill your blender halfway, remove the plastic insert from the lid to allow steam to escape, and drape a clean kitchen towel over the opening to prevent splatter.

It's worth the effort. This quick extra step turns rustic ingredients like canned beans, garlic and broth into something sophisticated in seconds. Just ladle it into a warm serving bowl, sprinkle the top with a generous handful of croutons, a drizzle of your best olive oil and a few fried sage leaves to add a little Tuscan flair.

**2. Garnish with abandon**

If Tuscan soup is about technique, chicken tortilla soup is about personality, and that personality comes from the garnishes. The base itself is wonderfully simple, with shredded rotisserie chicken, smoky chipotle peppers, black beans, corn and broth simmered just long enough to marry the flavors. The magic happens at the table with a variety of topping options. A squeeze of lime brightens the broth, cotija cheese adds salty richness, chopped cilantro adds an herbaceous freshness and sliced jalapenos bring a snappy, green heat. Crisp tortilla strips offer crunch, while avocado lends cool creaminess.

It's endlessly customizable, allowing diners to garnish their bowl in any way they like, making it ideal for families, picky eaters or anyone who likes a little creativity with dinner.

**3. Make simple switches**

Chowder usually leans on russet potatoes for body, but a spicy sweet potato version with poblano peppers opens the door to entirely new flavor profiles. The result is a chowder that feels familiar yet fresh. It's a reminder that a small ingredient shift can transform a classic into something exciting and new. The natural sweetness of the sweet potatoes plays beautifully with the gentle heat of the poblanos and the smokiness of the bacon. Once you try them in this chowder, you'll wonder why it took you so long.

Follow these quick recipes to learn how a little technique can turn pantry-friendly ingredients into something deeply satisfying, and how small choices make weeknight cooking feel more inspired – both proof that good food does not need to be complicated to be memorable.

## Sweet Potato, Poblano and Bacon Chowder

**Serves 6**

Creamy and hearty, this fun twist on a potato chowder brings a touch of sweetness to the savory soup.

**1 tbsp. butter**
**4 slices thick-cut bacon, chopped**
**1 medium onion, chopped**
**2 medium poblano chiles, seeded and chopped**
**1/4 c. all-purpose flour**
**3/4 tsp. salt**
**1/2 tsp. freshly ground black pepper**
**2 large sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into ½-in. pieces**
**5 c. chicken stock**
**1 c. heavy cream**

Add butter to a large pot over medium heat. Add bacon and cook, stirring frequently, until browned and crispy, around 5 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon and set aside on a plate lined with paper towels.

Add the onion and poblano chiles to the pot with the drippings and cook, stirring, until softened, about 6 minutes. Add flour, salt and pepper and continue to cook, stirring, for 1 minute longer. Add sweet potatoes and stock and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low, and simmer until sweet potatoes are tender, around 15 minutes.

Stir in cream. Taste and add more salt, if necessary, before ladling into serving bowls. Garnish with reserved bacon.

## Tuscan White Bean Soup

**Serves 6**

Note: Fried sage leaves can also make a lovely and flavorful garnish to this easy, but sophisticated soup. Just heat a thin layer of olive oil in a skillet over medium heat. Add fresh sage leaves and cook for 30 seconds before transferring to a paper towel to drain. Use the leaves as a garnish, along with croutons and a drizzle of olive oil.

**1 tbsp. olive oil**
**1 medium onion, chopped**
**1/2 c. chopped carrots**
**1/2 c. chopped celery**
**2 tbsp. chopped fresh sage**
**3 cloves garlic, minced**
**3 c. vegetable or chicken stock**
**3 (14-oz.) cans cannellini or white kidney beans, drained and rinsed**
**1/2 tsp. salt**
**1/2 tsp. freshly ground black pepper**
**Croutons, for serving**
**Good quality olive oil, for drizzling**

Fried sage leaves, optional Heat olive oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add onion, carrots and celery and cook until softened, about 8 minutes. Add chopped sage and garlic and cook for 1 more minute, or until fragrant.

Add the stock and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes. Add the beans, salt and pepper, and simmer until beans are heated through, about 5 minutes.

Using a blender, an immersion blender or food processor, puree the soup until smooth. (You may need to work in batches; see Tip.) Return pureed soup to the pot and continue to cook over medium-low heat until hot. Taste and add more salt, if necessary. Garnish with croutons, a drizzle of olive oil and fried sage leaves, if using.

Tip: To prevent the hot soup from splattering when using a blender, fill only halfway, loosen the plastic insert in the top and cover with a dish towel before blending.

## Chipotle Chicken Soup

**Serves 6**

Turn to this soup when you're looking for something ultra quick and easy that's sure to please everyone at the dinner table.

**6 c. chicken stock**
**4 cloves garlic, thinly sliced**
**1 to 2 chipotle peppers in adobo sauce, minced**
**2 (14-oz.) cans black beans, drained and rinsed**
**2 c. frozen corn**
**3 c. shredded cooked chicken**
**1/2 tsp. salt**
**1/4 tsp. freshly ground black pepper**
**Garnishes, as desired:**
**Chopped fresh cilantro**
**Chopped avocado**
**Crispy tortilla strips**
**Crumbled cotija cheese**
**Thinly sliced jalapeno**
**Lime wedges**

In a large pot over medium-high heat, bring to a boil the stock, garlic and chipotles. Once boiling, reduce heat to low and simmer for 15 minutes to blend the flavors. Add black beans, corn, chicken, salt and pepper and heat through for 5 minutes. Taste and add more salt, if necessary.

Ladle into bowls and serve with chopped cilantro, avocado, tortilla strips, cotija cheese, jalapeno slices and lime wedges, as desired.

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**GRETCHEN'S TABLE**

A cheesy chicken and broccoli casserole, topped with crispy potatoes.

Gretchen McKay / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette / TNS

# Make cheesy broccoli chicken bake like you remember

**By GRETCHEN MCKAY**
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

Most of us who grew up in the 1970s and '80s can recall certain staple dishes – either with love or so much distaste.

Then, and to this day, I can't stand even the thought of tuna noodle casserole, a meal my older brothers loved – they'd fight over the crunchy crust of Ritz crackers my mom always piled on top – and my husband every once in a blue moon asks for.

But the cheesy mix of chicken and broccoli known as Chicken Divan? Man, I could eat that once a week and never complain.

Named after the Divan Parisien restaurant at Chatham Hotel in New York City – where the dish was created in the early 1900s – Chicken Divan became smart mothers' tactic for getting their kids to eat vegetables after the recipe popped up in cookbooks in the late 1950s and early '60s.

Broccoli is slightly bitter when raw and mushy (and slightly stinky) when overcooked, so it can be a hard sell on its own. But add some roasted chicken and top it with a creamy cheese sauce and the result is a rich and cozy casserole that even the pickiest child will happily eat.

There are probably as many recipes for broccoli-cheese casserole as there are cooks. Many include canned soup and mayo (my mom's version) and can be made with either fresh or frozen florets. The topping can also be personalized with crackers, bread crumbs, panko or just a generous sprinkling of grated Parmesan cheese – or sometimes a combo of all of the above.

In this recipe, I went the "fresh" route with a package of long and tender baby broccoli from Trader Joe's. I also used two types of cheese – grated Parmesan and extra-sharp cheddar – in the butter-based sauce along with some heavy cream.

I had hoped to top the casserole with a crunchy layer of tater tots (very trendy these days) but could only find hash brown patties. So I cut them into squares, fried them in a little butter to crisp them up and crossed my fingers it would work. It did – beautifully.

## Cheesy Broccoli Chicken Bake

**Serves 6**

**1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breast, rinsed and patted dry**
**Salt and freshly ground black pepper**
**1 tablespoon olive oil**
**12-ounce package of baby broccoli, trimmed and cut into 4-inch florets**
**5 tablespoons butter, divided**
**5 tablespoons flour or cornstarch**
**2 cups chicken broth or stock**
**1/2 cup heavy cream**
**1 cup shredded Parmesan cheese, divided**
**1 cup shredded sharp cheddar**
**8 frozen hash browns patties, thawed and cut into bite-sized pieces**
**Grated Parmesan cheese, for garnish**

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Season chicken breasts with salt and pepper.

Heat oil in a large skillet until shimmering. Add chicken and cook, turning once, until it is cooked through, 10-12 minutes total. Remove to plate and allow to cool for 5 minutes, then cut into bite-sized chunks and place in a large bowl.

Meanwhile, steam or boil broccoli florets in well salted water for 4-5 minutes until tender-crisp, drain well and add to bowl with chicken. Toss to combine.

Melt 4 tablespoons butter in a heavy saucepan over medium-low heat. Add flour or cornstarch and cook, continuously whisking, for around 3 minutes to make a roux.

Add chicken stock or broth slowly, a little at a time, whisking constantly, until you reach a boil. Then reduce heat and simmer while whisking occasionally for 8 minutes.

Reduce heat to low, and cook for 10 minutes more.

Fold in cream along with 1/2 cup Parmesan and all the cheddar. Stir to combine and cook until cheese is completely melted. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Add cheese sauce to the broccoli-chicken mixture and stir to combine.

Pour mixture into the bottom of a buttered 2-quart casserole dish. Sprinkle remaining 1/2 cup grated Parmesan on top.

In a small skillet, melt remaining 1 tablespoon butter, add hash brown squares and cook, tossing often, until crispy. Sprinkle on top of the casserole.

Bake in hot oven until just hot, around 20 minutes. For an extra crispy top, turn oven to broil, sprinkle casserole with a little grated Parmesan and broil 5 inches from heat until casserole is bubbling and golden, about 1 minute.

Serve immediately.

STAR★SEARCH

Duo Vespertilio, Harry Merlin Piper, H3rizon, JR De Guzman, Anthony Anderson, Yair Keydar and Movement 55 in "Star Search."

Photos by Kit Karzen / Netflix / TNS

# Netflix's *'Star Search'* revival taps into nostalgia, star judges and a swath of talent

**By ITZEL LUNA**
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

LOS ANGELES — An orange hue illuminated an otherwise dark stage nestled in a CBS lot in Studio City.

Yair Keydar extended his arms toward the live audience, a smile overtaking his face as the 12-year-old reached the chorus of the "Wizard of Oz" classic, "Over the Rainbow."

It's the second week of Netflix's "Star Search," which kicked off Jan. 20. The live variety talent competition show is a reboot of the syndicated series helmed by Ed McMahon thatpremiered in 1983 and became a launching pad for some of the biggest stars of the past few decades, including Britney Spears and Beyoncé.

Keydar let the song's last high note linger in the air, his voice nearly floating as it brought the packed room to a pause. The celebrity judges – Chrissy Teigen, Jelly Roll and Sarah Michelle Gellar – rose to their feet, tears dancing in their eyes.

It was the young singer's first time performing for a live studio audience and to a global audience on one of the world's biggest streaming platforms.

"I don't know what's gonna happen with the world, but you're gonna be a star," said Grammy-winning singer Jelly Roll, his voice nearly drowned by a chorus of applause from the audience.

Performances like Keydar's are what the revival was meant for, the judges said.

Launching a new show can be challenging, so Netflix leaned into the nostalgia that made the original memorable for earlier generations while also adding modern twists to attract a new audience, said David Friedman, one of the talent competition's showrunners.

"Saying that there's some built-in nostalgia and memories that you can remember with your family … that's what made it really exciting," he said.

The show, airing live on Tuesdays and Wednesdays for a five-week run that concludes Feb. 17, is a novel undertaking for the streaming giant. It also introduced new technology that allows for live voting straight from the Netflix app.

Similar competition series, including "America's Got Talent" and "American Idol," have utilized audience voting to help decide winners, but the ease of voting is one element the show is banking on to keep viewers hooked. The first three weeks of voting on "Star Search" have gone off without any major technical issues, Friedman said.

"Star Search" is Netflix's latest foray into livestreaming events, which have seen their share of hiccups as the streamer works to scale demand. Previous attempts at live broadcasting, like the Jake Paul-Mike Tyson fight in 2024, resulted in buffering issues. But as the company continues to invest in livestreaming events, the issues have become less pronounced. Netflix recently livestreamed "Skyscraper Live," in which climber Alex Honnold scaled Taipei 101, and has plans to stream BTS' comeback concert in March.

The series, which is hosted by Anthony Anderson, debuted at No. 5 on Netflix's U.S. charts but has dropped off the top 10 since. Nonetheless, Friedman and others on the show remain hopeful the show will find its footing and resonate with viewers with its voting system and unique format.

Amid a sea of new titles constantly fighting for people's attention, Friedman said he hopes viewers give the show a chance.

"I just hope people find it," he said. "Awareness is the hardest thing in this day and age. There's just so much content on your phone, on different platforms. I think people, if they find this, I think there's something special going on here."

JR De Guzman, left, Anthony Anderson and Good Cop/Rad Cop in Netflix's "Star Search."

The show includes eight categories – junior music is one them. Keydar was up against Eric Adrien Williams, a 10-year-old gospel soul singer who beat a young country singer in Week 1.

Keydar's performance was the first to receive a perfect score – five stars from all three contestants – higher than Williams. But the scores still awaited results from the show's fourth judge: the audience.

Viewers had 60 seconds to cast their votes. A spokesperson for Netflix said viewers from more than 160 countries voted, though they did not share the exact number of votes cast.

Keydar received a higher average, beating Williams and becoming the new category champion. He later defended his title during the third week. Now, the Florida native will fight for a spot in the finale during Week 4.

## How the categories, judging and voting work

As is true in show business, contestants are only as good as their last "Star Search" performance, Friedman said.

Each week, a champion is crowned in each category. They then go up against a challenger the following week and must fight to keep their title until the finale. The show requires extensive script changes and dress rehearsals ahead of the taping in the evening, and contestants are building out their acts throughout the week.

In order to vote, viewers have to watch the show live and cast their vote 60 seconds after a performance, giving each act one to five stars. The average score given by the audience, referred to as the fourth judge, is half of the contestant's overall score.

Sixteen contestants perform across eight categories within two days of taping each week. Categories include junior music, solo music, musical group, dance, comedy, magic variety, junior variety and a catch-all variety category. Judges don't see any of the contestants until the live performance.

However, unlike the original show, which featured a winner in each category, the Netflix reboot will crown one single winner in the finale, which Gellar said has shifted her judging philosophy.

"I do have to think about everything, like, can this person be the sole 'Star Search' winner? So to me, that elevates what kind of star we're looking for," Gellar said.

The live vote holds more importance than before in the reboot and is crucial because the audience, both live and at home, "are the people that are going to be sitting in the theater seats watching these people," Anderson said.

"They're going to be the ones sitting in front of the television or in the stadiums, or buying the albums, or watching the concerts," he said. "It's great that they have an opportunity to have a say so."

Some contestants, like Bear Bailey, a 34-year-old Southern R&B and country singer, were particularly hard to see go, the judges said. Bailey blew the judges away during Week 1 with his soulful rendition of "Hard Fought Hallelujah," bringing Jelly Roll to tears in the show's first heartfelt moment of the season.

He returned for Week 2 but was bested by Sophia Saylor, an 18-year-old who gave a raw performance of Billie Eilish's Grammy-winning song, "What Was I Made For." The young singer from Michigan, who shared her experience living with a visual impairment, "gave her blood" in her performance, Gellar said.

The show's format "symbolizes what it's like to be in the entertainment business as a whole," Friedman said.

"If you're No. 1 on the charts, there's always someone coming for your spot. If you've got the No. 1 box office movie, someone's coming for you," he said. "If you're any aspect of entertainment, it's always about keeping your spot at the top."

Part of the live show's success hinges on the ever-evolving setup of the two stages in the lot, which stage crews have to build and dismantle in mere seconds. Netflix also doesn't hold commercial breaks during the show, which is typically crucial time on broadcast shows to address any issues, Friedman said.

"When you're on Netflix, you're basically going live without a net," he said. "You're just sprinting right to the final."

## Why the show was revived

"Star Search" had been in the works for years since Netflix became the owner of the intellectual property. It took longer for the streaming giant to perfect the live voting technology, Friedman said.

The original show aired from 1983 to 1995 and platformed artists like a 10-year-old Spears and the Backstreet Boys. (In Week 2, AJ McLean made an appearance on the show.) Comedians Adam Sandler and Jeff Ross also got their start on the show.

Most of the stars who appeared on the show and later became household names didn't win the competition, but the platform helped set them up for storied careers by giving them exposure.

"All of those people … didn't make it to the final round or didn't win, and we look at the careers that they've had since then," Anderson said. "It's pretty amazing what this show has been able to do for talent."

And Friedman didn't want to change the formula too much. The original show "wasn't broken," Friedman said. "We didn't say we're gonna do it completely different. I think we really embraced what it was, because people loved watching it."

For Anderson, who grew up watching the original series, he didn't think twice when asked to host the "Star Search" revival, he said.

The "black-ish" actor has prior experience hosting game shows like ABC's "To Tell the Truth" and Fox's "We Are Family." But it was the love of the original show that drew him to "Star Search."

The Compton-raised artist recalls begging his mom "to put some gas in the car and get to Hollywood" so he could audition in the acting category, he said.

"Unfortunately, that never happened for me. But here I am as the host. I get to see it on the other side now," Anderson said. "I'm standing on stage next to our biggest stars on deck. I'm excited about that."

Some of the judges had ties to the original show, both Gellar and Teigen's husband, singer John Legend, had once auditioned for the show and were rejected.

The judging trio, who hadn't worked together before the show, have built a chemistry that can't be fabricated, Tiegen said, and it's only strengthening as the weeks go on.

"We're playing off each other so much. Now, there's moments where Anthony doesn't even have to kick it to somebody," Jelly Roll said. "We'll start and the other ones just kind of chime in and get it down the line. It's getting cooler and cooler."

Gellar, who became a cult icon as the lead in "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," was the first to sign onto the project, after deciding late last year that she wanted to venture into unscripted TV. She was drawn to the show's live voting feature. The actor and self-proclaimed dance mom often gives the harshest critiques and seldom hands out a perfect five-star score.

Jelly Roll, who was the last to sign onto the project, has delivered some of the show's most heartfelt moments, and is known to hand out higher scores than his counterparts. Tiegen, a former model turned TV personality, is a balancing act between the two, often giving pointed critiques.

"We really have to think about speaking eloquently, being concise, all those things, because we don't get a second take," Gellar said. "There's no one in our ear giving us jokes. We're out there, sort of going for it."

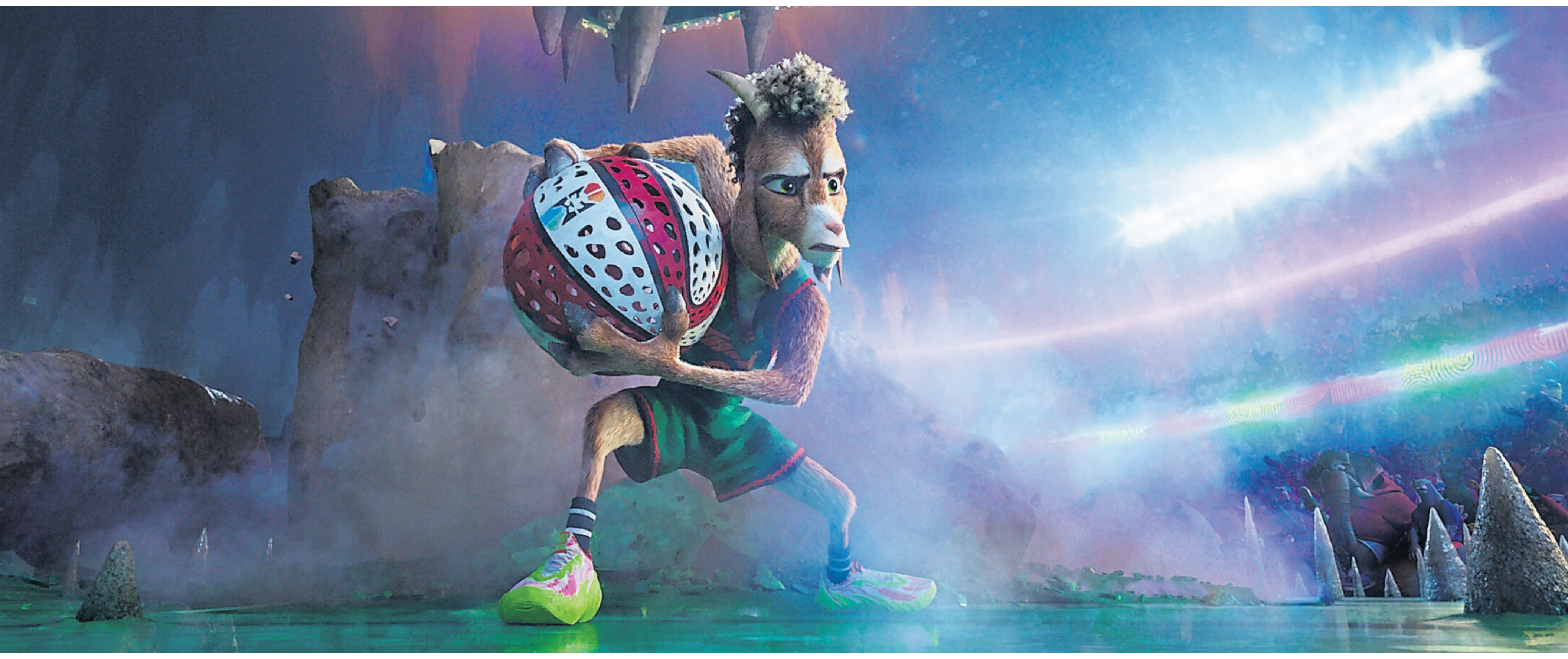
The variety category performances are often the hardest to judge because of its diversity, the judges said. The first three weeks saw an 8-year-old aerialist, a 74-year-old comedian, a laser-performing duo from Vietnam and a Las Vegas magician who hung from the ceiling in a straitjacket.

"Other shows have missed at variety," Jelly Roll said. "We've watched dudes fight with lasers. We've seen an 8-year-old swing from a ceiling. We got a couple right now that almost dies every week. We've seen it all."

The showrunner and judges hope the show brings much-needed light amid darkness in the country. Some contestants, like Las Vegas-based magician TJ Salta, have used their time on stage to spread messages of unity.

"There's a lot on the air right now and the news and stuff that is hard. There's things that don't make our days that fun," Friedman said. "If we can add some fun, I think that is a big thing for us."

**MOVIE REVIEW**



Sony Pictures Animation / TNS

Voiced by Caleb McLaughlin, Will Harris is the small-sized hero with big dreams in "GOAT."

# *'GOAT,'* latest from Sony Pictures Animations, gets too few buckets

**By MARK MESZOROS**
The News-Herald (Willoughby, Ohio) (TNS)

Sony Pictures Animation has made the world sit up and take notice in recent years thanks to its first two excellent "Spider-Verse" films, which have dazzled on the big screen, and the highly enjoyable and downright infectious "KPop Demon Hunters," the most-watched title in the history of streaming giant Netflix, with more than 500 million global views.

Now the studio brings us "GOAT," an underdog tale of a small hooper with a big heart.

While we won't go so far as to call it "baaaaaad" – sorry, last goat joke, we promise – it's not in the class of the other movies.

In auditoriums this week, "GOAT" is an example of what we'll call "short-attention-span theater," a flick too busy throwing stuff against the wall, with too little of it sticking, to find its emotional core.

It's promising early on, with its expectedly great looks obvious from the start and an effective-enough introduction to its likable lead character, Will Harris (Caleb McLaughlin). We meet the scrappy goat when he's just, well, a kid – as he's being taken to see his first roarball game by his loving mom.

We should stop here and explain that roarball is a lot like basketball, only it's played by animals and on potentially hazardous surfaces such as ice and one that sits precariously below stalactites. The co-ed game is played exclusively by large creatures, or "bigs," who are happy to repeat a commonly used phrase: "Smalls don't ball."

Nonetheless, as Will watches the hometown Vineland Thorns – with his favorite player, superstar black leopard Jett Filmore (Gabrielle Union) – play, he says, "That's gonna be me, Mom."

A decade later, with Mom gone, diner delivery man Will holds on to that dream – trying to sneak practice time at a venue known as "the cage" before the bigs kick him out – even as he's struggling to hold on to the room he's renting.

Meanwhile, Jett is still the Thorns' star, but she's never brought home the Claw – the league's championship trophy – with some fans suggesting that, deep into her career, "she's washed."

**'Goat'**

★★

**MPA rating:** PG (for some rude humor and brief mild language)

**Running time:** 1:40

**How to watch:** In theaters

In town to take on the Thorns with his team, the Magma, reigning roarball league MVP Mane Attraction (Aaron Pierre), shows up at the cage to take on all ballers brave enough to go against him for cash. When Will puts up his rent money to face off with Mane, he gets the best of the cocky horse, if only momentarily.

Still, the little goat does enough to go viral, and he's soon signed by the Thorns' publicity-hungry warthog owner, Flo Everson (Jenifer Lewis), as the team's sixth player. When asked by the excited Will if Jett is on board with this, Flo lies through her tusks by claiming it was the star's idea.

Boy, that is not the case, as Jett – the de facto coach, holding much more power than the teams' actual leader, Dennis Cooper (Patton Oswalt) – refuses to let Will on the court with her and the other team members: high-strung ostrich Olivia Burke (Nicola Coughlan); Modo Olachenko (Nick Kroll), a Komodo dragon with a big personality; defensive specialist rhino Archie Everhardt (McLaughlin's "Stranger Things" castmate David Harbour), who's also a girl dad; Lenny Williamson (Stephen Curry), a giraffe who also aspires to be a rapper.

Of course, Will's time in purgatory lasts only so long, "GOAT" from there bouncing its narrative ball all over the place wildly. There's a potentially compelling story about an older player mentoring and then passing the torch to a younger player, but the story by Nicolas Curcio and Peter Chiarelli and screenplay by Aaron Buchsbaum and Teddy Riley only flirts with it.

Director Tyree Dillihay oversees an affair that is energetic and likely to appeal to plenty of young viewers but decidedly lacking in strong storytelling. "GOAT," which gets some mileage out of the dual meaning of the word, which in sports also is an acronym for "greatest of all time," succeeds in celebrating the culture that surrounds basketball. That aspect of the movie takes it only so far, however.

Again, it does look pretty darn cool, the filmmakers utilizing tech developed for video games, Epic Games' Unreal Engine, for some of its undeniable razzle-dazzle. Plus, the character designs are distinct and the world they inhabit is well-conceived and executed.

And "GOAT" does deliver a few humorous moments, our favorite being a frustrated Jett putting in earbuds to listen to a song in which a cat repeatedly sings "meow," but it's not exactly a laugh riot.

Lastly, the voice performances are solid, with "Stranger Things" star McLaughlin helping to craft Will into an appealing hero.

The movie's ties to real-world basketball include Union, wife of retired NBA star Dwyane Wade, and, of course, Curry, a longtime star for the Golden State Warriors. However, even the use of Curry feels off; why have arguably the greatest of all time when it comes to long-distance shooting not voice a sharp shooter in the movie?

"GOAT" has some game, but for all the shots it takes, it scores too few points.

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**MOVIE REVIEW**

# *'Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die'* is zany, half-baked

**By MARK MESZOROS**
The News-Herald (Willoughby, Ohio) (TNS)

**'Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die'**

★★

**MPA rating:** R (for pervasive language, violence, some grisly images and brief sexual content)

**Running time:** 2:14

**How to watch:** In theaters

Inside a diner in Los Angeles, customers scroll through their phones as coffee is poured, burger patties are flipped, food is plated and a selection of condiments is dramatically lit.

Ultimately, in "Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die," the well-meaning but disappointing first film in a handful of years from "The Ring" director Gore Verbinski, it's the phones that are important.

A hooded man (Sam Rockwell) enters the diner, announcing that he's from the future, he's strapped with explosives and, just as he's done 116 times before this, he's come to recruit a few of the patrons for an all-important mission – to alter an artificial intelligence that has made his time "a nightmare apocalypse."

Rockwell ("Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri," "Jojo Rabbit") is terrific in this extended sequence, as he illustrates that he's met all these folks before, that he's still trying to find the right combination that will lead to a successful outcome and that, if anyone tries to leave, he'll blow them all up.

It all started with the phones, he says of the coming mess, folks turning the first few minutes of the day in bed with their devices into all-day affairs, resulting in a population that can't even be bothered to rise to its feet. Algorithms feed them content they find compelling, and medical devices, hooked to them with tubes, keep them alive. He's here to right a wrong on the level, he says, of Adolf Hitler and the Segway scooter.

Unfortunately, this crackly opening stretch is the high mark of the comedy-heavy science-fiction adventure penned by Matthew Robinson ("Dora and the Lost City of Gold," "Love and Monsters"). "Good Luck" is an unfocused mishmash of ideas.

Still, there's fun to be had in some of the wildness that awaits after The Man From the Future finally collects this night's band of brave souls: teachers Mark (Michael Peña, "A Million Miles Away") and Janet (Zazie Beetz, "Joker"), distraught mother Susan (Juno Temple, "Ted Lasso"), prickly Uber driver Scott (Asim Chaudhry, "People Just Do Nothing"), the allergic-to-tech Ingrid (Haley Lu Richardson, "Unpregnant") and a couple of other folks who don't hang around long enough to justify learning their names.

(The Man originally declines Ingrid's offer to help – saying something about her creeps him out, that he doesn't need the off-her-meds vibes – but a potentially prophetic spinning bottle of hot sauce that points to her when it stops changes his mind. And thus Ingrid, who gets nose bleeds from Wi-Fi and cellular phones, obviously will prove to be important to the narrative.)

Briarcliff Entertainment / TNS

The Man From the Future, portrayed by Sam Rockwell, center, tries to persuade folks eating at a diner to join him on a dangerous endeavor in "Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die."

The band of adventurers embarks on a journey that's both relatively short and, as The Man has promised, is laced with dangers. The intended destination is a house in which a 9-year-old boy is only a brief time away from completing the digital god. There's no stopping this powerful entity from being created, The Man says, but if the AI safety protocols developed years later can be added to the code now, the future will be saved.

Along the way, Verbinski and Robinson flesh out a few of the characters with flashbacks, starting with Mark and Janet, as the issue of high school students being addicted to their phones is satirized effectively. Let's just say the word "zombies" comes to mind to describe them.

A flashback involving Janet is less successful, the film attempting to offer commentary about the prevalence of school shootings in the United States. One daring early joke lands, but this section goes too far, as well-intentioned as it may be.

Lastly, we learn about Ingrid, whose analog-forward boyfriend, Tim (Tom Taylor), is mysteriously gifted a cutting-edge device.

"Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die" doesn't give off the vibe that it's all that concerned with making sense in the end, which is good, as it doesn't. It's also, at best, vaguely trying to keep a secret.

At the end of the day, it's a time-loop movie, the rare one where we see only one small, if crucial, part of the circle the protagonist is traveling. And, you guessed it, the fun of witnessing other iterations of this hero's journey is sorely lacking.

It certainly doesn't help matters that the ending is bloated, contributing to a runtime that's a bit longer than it needs to be.

This is Verbinski's first film since his underrated 2017 effort, "A Cure for Wellness." "Good Luck" lacks the striking looks of that movie and is less close in quality to 2003's "Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl" and more toward that fun adventure's first two lackluster sequels, which he also helmed.

Clearly no fan of AI, Verbinski, according to the film's production notes, read Robinson's script back in 2020 and sent it to Rockwell two years later. It finally arrives in theaters this week, at a time when AI is used regularly by many of us, so its relevancy remains. On the other hand, we are being bombarded with AI-inspired cautionary tales, and this one, while just slightly more entertaining than not, fails to stand out from the crowd, despite all its zaniness.

At best, if watched later at home, it may be a reason to put your phone down, at least intermittently.

NBC Television / Getty Images / TNS

Television still shows the popular music and television group the Monkees as they perform onstage in an episode of their self-titled TV show, late 1960s. From left, Davy Jones, Peter Tork, Mickey Dolenz (on drums) and Michael Nesmith.

# Monkees' Micky Dolenz celebrates his late bandmates on 60th anniversary tour

**By PETER LARSEN**
The Orange County Register (TNS)

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Micky Dolenz is the last of the Monkees – Michael Nesmith, Peter Tork and Davy Jones all are gone – but when he steps on stage to perform, he says he's never really alone.

"It's weird. In a way, they're still here," Dolenz says on a recent call to talk about 60 Years of the Monkees, his new tour for 2026. "Because every show I do, I show video. Every show I do, I sing songs that Mike wrote or even sang.

"I think about it all the time," he says. "After Davy passed, I couldn't even look at some of the video behind me without tearing up. It was tough."

Nesmith was the last to go. He died in December 2021, less than a month after he and Dolenz wrapped up the Monkees Farewell Tour with a show at the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles. Tork died in 2019, Jones in 2012.

And that might have been that, but for Dolenz's love and care for the Monkees' legacy.

"I do feel a responsibility, I guess, to kind of keep the home fires burning," he says.

This new tour celebrates the 60th anniversary of "The Monkees" TV sitcom, which premiered in September 1966.

"I will be speaking to that," Dolenz says. "But frankly, it's always 90 percent the music. We intend to do the hit songs, the fan favorites from each album, chronologically.

"But also weaving in the origin of the show, the history, the casting process. And I always speak volumes about the songwriters, because as you probably know, we had some of the best ever writing for us."

Does that mean "Last Train to Clarksville," the Monkees' debut single and first No. 1 hit, opens the show?

"Yep, you nailed it," Dolenz says. "But I've started many shows with that because it's just a great opener and the first big hit off the first album.

"The rest of the set we haven't locked down, except that albums will be in order," he says. "Our problem, now my problem, is what not to do.

"There's always the can't-not-do's like 'Clarksville,' like 'I'm a Believer,' like 'Pleasant Valley Sunday,' like 'Stepping Stone,'" Dolenz continues. "Then it's always a challenge and fun to kind of go, 'Well, how about this one we haven't done for a while?'"

## Getting the gig

Dolenz had starred in two seasons of the TV series "Circus Boy" as a child actor in the late '50s, but was in college studying architecture when he auditioned for "The Monkees" in 1965.

"I thought if I couldn't make it as an architect, I could always fall back on showbiz," he says. "That was my parents' business. During the summers, '63, '64, I was doing day jobs on TV shows at the time. "Mr. Novak, "Peyton Place," during school breaks.

"Then pilot season would come along, and I would go up for some pilots," Dolenz says. "That year, '65, pilot season came along, and there were at least two or three other shows that were music-oriented aimed at the younger generation."

Jason Kempin / Getty Images / TNS

Micky Dolenz performs at City Winery Nashville on Dec. 2, 2025, in Nashville, Tennessee.

The rise of bands such as the Beatles and the Beach Boys, and the general popularity of rock, pop and folk music had caught the attention of executives in the studios and production companies, and all of them wanted their own piece of the youth market.

"Obviously, they want to make a show the kids will like," Dolenz says. "In fact, most of the auditions I went to were these other musical shows.

"There was one that was like a Beach Boys surfing band," he says. "There was one that was like a Peter, Paul, and Mary folk group. There was one like a New Christy Minstrels, a big family, 'Mighty Wind' folk thing.

"And then there was 'The Monkees," he says. "You've heard about the ad in the trade newspapers?" [Variety and the Hollywood Reporter ran ads for open auditions for hip young men.] Well, I'd already had a series as a kid, so I had an agent. I didn't go to a cattle call.

"When one has had one's own series, one has a private audition," he says in his best pompous thespian voice.

"When I went into the audition, there were these two guys sitting there in jeans and T-shirts, eating pizza," Dolenz says. "I thought they were there for the audition. They were the producers, the creators, Bob Rafelson and Bert Schneider. So from the get-go, it was different."

Rafelson and Schneider weren't that much older than Dolenz, and they were into the same kind of things he and his future castmates in the series liked.

"They were out of the East Coast, Kerouac, beatnik, Greenwich Village scene," he says. "They were huge fans of the Beatles." I remember thinking at the time, 'Oh boy, this is different. I really would like to get this one.'"

He auditioned with Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode," accompanying himself on guitar. He did scene studies, improv, and a filmed screen test, none of which were common for TV series at the time.

"So they cast me, and they said, 'You're going to be the drummer,'" Dolenz says. "I said, 'Well, I play guitar.' They said, 'We know, but we got lots of guitar players.' So I said, 'Fine, where do I start?'"

## 'Where do I start?'

That willingness to do what was required for the job was a product of his past work in film and television, as well as growing up with parents who were actors and singers themselves, Dolenz says.

"When I had been cast in '"Circus Boy"' in the '50s, they said, 'You're going to learn to ride an elephant,'" he says. "I said, 'Great, where do I start?' If somebody had said, 'You're going to be a scuba diver,' I would have said, 'Yeah, where do I start?'"

If Rafelson and Schneider wanted him to play the drums in addition to being the Monkees' co-lead vocalist with Jones? Not a problem.

Dolenz says he remembers meeting Jones during the audition process, possibly because Jones was also an experienced actor as a child and young man in his native England and on Broadway.

"I do remember the day we met all together," he says. "It was a wardrobe fitting, because that's the first thing you do when you do a pilot.

"It was on the same lot, same set, the same place where I did 'Circus Boy,'" Dolenz says. "Some of the crew on the Monkees were the same crew from 'Circus Boy' 10 years earlier, so it was like old-home week for me.

"But I remember quite clearly, on the lot in front of the wardrobe department, one of the producers said, "OK, Micky, this is Mike, Mike this is Peter, Peter this is Davy, you guys are the Monkees," he says.

Even then, though, the four actor-musicians didn't really start to bond yet.

"When we met, I hadn't even quit school," Dolenz says. "It wasn't like I knew we were going to spend a lot of time together. The pilot might not have sold. Remember, the Monkees was not a group; it was a musical comedy television show about a group.

"When I got the pilot, it was right in the middle of a semester," he says. "I just took 10 days off school to do the pilot, and then I went back to school."

Only when the show was greenlit by NBC with a 26-episode order for its first season did he finally stop his studies. Only then did the chemistry of the casting start to surface as the four Monkees came together on the set.

"The producers of any show are looking for that chemistry, charisma, the click," Dolenz says. "One of the producers, when asked about the Monkees, said, 'We just caught lightning in a bottle.' That's what happens."

## Chemistry tests

Quickly, in those first few months of the show, the actors gelled into a tight unit that would fix scenes based on their deep understanding of their characters, Dolenz says.

"Within the first couple of episodes, we would be telling the director, 'Oh, wait a minute, Davy wouldn't say that line, that's a Micky line,'" he says. "And they would go for it. They were capitalizing on the improvisational qualities that they had been looking for."

Musically, though, the guys in the fictional band all had distinctly different backgrounds.

"Music-wise, it was not difficult, but it was different," Dolenz says. "In the 'normal' group, they were brothers and cousins like the Beach Boys, or they met when they were 14 years old like the Beatles. That's more common, and they tend to be very, very similar in type and style.

"Because there's usually one singer-songwriter, maybe two, and they'll surround themselves with like-minded artists who are of the same spirit, the same genre of music," he says. "That's what usually happens.

"Well, with the Monkees, you had four lead singers with entirely different genres. Not one better than the other, but very distinct genres.

"Mike Nesmith, country, electric, pop rock," Dolenz continues. "Me, I was singing rock and roll, screaming Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis. Davy doing Broadway ballads. Peter doing hardcore Greenwich Village folky, bluesy, Woody Guthrie stuff."

It wasn't always easy to make their musical backgrounds fit, he says.

"But in a way, I think that becomes one of the really interesting things, those different flavors."

## Singers and songs

The Monkees music came from the cream of contemporary songwriters in the '60s in that period just before songwriters increasingly began to sing their own work. Neil Diamond, Carole King, Tommy Boyce and Bobby Hart, and Jeff Barry all wrote hits for the group.

"When I was cast and the series went into production, I remember the [music] publisher taking me down to a little bunch of offices on Sunset Boulevard," Dolenz says. "He said you should meet the songwriters who are going to be writing songs for you. This is me, just by myself. And I said great.

"Went down and into this little hallway of cubbyholes," he says. "He opened the door and this was girl sitting behind the piano with a Wollensak taperecorder, and he said, "Micky Dolenz, Carole King. Carole will be writing songs for you. I'm like, 'Oh, hi.'

"Remember, I'm 20 years old, she's like 23. And he walked down the hall and said, 'Here, Micky, this is David Gates; David, this is Micky Dolenz."

In those days, no one really knew the names of songwriters for pop hits, Dolenz says. Only later, when King recorded albums such as "Tapestry" and Gates co-founded and sang lead vocals in Bread, would writers like them find individual fame.

For Dolenz, though, the work the songwriters delivered was accepted with the same can-do spirit of his "When do I start?" attitude to most things.

"They would offer me demos, and I'd listen and sing along with it," he says. "I don't recall ever – I probably did occasionally – say, 'I don't think this is my kind of song.' And I was quite happy to do that."

At times, though, his workload as one of the Monkees lead singers took a toll.

"I had to record so much material because they wanted two new songs every television show," Dolenz says. "And there were 26 episodes a year. So I would go in after filming the TV show 10 or 12 hours a day, and sometimes record two vocals a night.

"A funny side story – you know the song 'Clarksville'? the bit in the middle?"

He sings the nonverbal runs that appear in its bridge.

"Well, that had words to it originally," Dolenz continues. "I don't remember what they were. Something like, 'Going to the station and I'll meet you in the morning and I'll bada bada bada,'" he sings.

"Years later, Tommy Boyce reminded me there were words to that bit," he says. "I said, 'Really?' He said, 'Yeah, but it was midnight. You had just come off the show for 10 hours.' And you said, "I can't do that, I can't learn all these words and sing that. It's late, and I've got to go home."

"And he said, 'Oh [bleep], just go "Doodle doodle doodle do,""" Dolenz says and laughs. "And that of course has become a great hook."

## Becoming real

Dolenz has long been annoyed that some have dismissed the Monkees as a manufactured band, as if that made them less legitimate than their performances live and in the studio show them to be.

The problem, he says, is that they're looking at the show all wrong.

"Just always keep in mind that the Monkees was not a group," he says. "It was the cast of a musical comedy television show. It was Marx Brothers movies for half an hour on TV. If you can get your head around it, everything makes more sense."

But then they were sent on tour, so … ?

"I know where you're going with that, and you're absolutely right," Dolenz says. "They must have had it in mind or they wouldn't have had musicians and singers. They would have done the old Hollywood thing of dubbing Natalie Wood's voice [in "West Side Story"] or Steve Allen as Benny Goodman [in "The Benny Goodman Story"].

"Nobody ever talks about that or says, 'Oh, you know he wasn't playing,'" he says. "But the Monkees was different from the get-go. The producers must have had that in mind, that if the show even gets on the air, we're going to do it and do it for real."

Forty years later, the TV series "Glee" did something similar, Dolenz notes.

"Those were kids who could do it all," he says. "They were an imaginary glee club, but they went out on the road [to do live shows] because they could all sing and dance and act. This is 40 years after the Monkees. You wouldn't have called that a manufactured glee club, would you?"

When Dolenz, Jones, Nesmith and Tork eventually did gain more control over their work in the studio and their live performances on the road, that marked the chapter Dolenz describes as Monkees 2.0, which lasts through various reunions to today.

"I think Mike Nesmith came up with the perfect description," Dolenz says. "He said, 'When we went on the road and hit that stage the first time in front of thousands of kids, Pinocchio became a real boy.'"

# BOOKS

## Elizabeth McCracken recalls being first to read Ann Patchett's 'Bel Canto'

**By ERIK PEDERSEN**
The Orange County Register (TNS)

Elizabeth McCracken is the author of eight books, including the National Book Award finalist, "The Giant's House." She's been on the faculty at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and holds the James A. Michener Chair in Fiction at the University of Texas at Austin.

Here, she talks about her new book, "A Long Game," and her reading life.

**Q:** Your new book, "A Long Game: Notes on Writing Fiction," is a joy. I grabbed it as I took my dog to the vet, and was glad to have your voice in my head while in the waiting room. (Turns out my dog was fine, just kind of goofy, and I realize now that I'm supposed to be asking you a question…)

**A:** Um, so tell readers about your new book, please.

First, I am glad that your dog is fine, even though it seems strange that you had to go to a vet to get a diagnosis of goofiness. I could have done that for you for free!

Second: my book is a guide to writing, sort of, full of advice and opinions, a little cranky, though all the crankiness is meant to be encouraging. It is divided into 280 sections, with an index.

**Q:** "A Long Game: Notes on Writing Fiction" is funny and wise and seemslike it would be enjoyable even for readers who don't plan to write fiction. Was that the plan, or did it just work out that way?

**A:** It wasn't that way at the start, which may be (now that you mention it) why it took me a while to get it off the ground. The first draft was a slog – and also quite bad – because I was so fixated on who would read it. Once I started writing without aiming it at writers, I began to enjoy the process, which for me is a necessity.

**Q:** You write that this new book is meant to be of use. Was writing it useful to you as well? It seems like you had to sift through so many life experiences and work processes – things that typically run in the background of your mind – that I imagine it could have been exhausting.

**A:** Anything I write non-cynically is useful to me, I think, though I'm not sure I've thought of it that way before.

It's possible that my first draft was a little cynical in its composition. Joan Didion famously said, "I write to find out what I am thinking," which is how I feel. Composed sentences are how I organize my thoughts.

As a young writer, I was always afraid of exposure, of people knowing things about me. Now that I am middle-aged, if I have that glimmer of fear, I know I'm onto something.

**Q:** You spent the last year as a judge for the National Book Awards. How many books did you need to read? What's a book that didn't win that you also loved? Can you share some gossip about judging or the judges?

**A:** We judges are expressly forbidden from gossiping about the process at all, never mind in newspapers, goddammit. (I do love gossip.) It's safe to say that I admired every single book on both the long and short lists. I will say that I think the best book published last year is Yiyun Li's extraordinary "Things in Nature Merely Grow," which was shortlisted in nonfiction.

**Q:** Is there a book or books you always recommend to other readers?

**A:** Two books that I particularly love, both of which are very small: "Utz" by Bruce Chatwin (first recommended by my husband, Edward Carey) and "Maud Martha" by Gwendolyn Brooks (first recommended by my friend, Asali Solomon, whose astounding "Days of Afrekete" I recommend all the time, too).

**Q:** What are you reading now?

**A:** Lauren Hough's "Monster of a Land," which is coming out in 2026. It's sort of like "Travels With Charley" for the 21st Century, though at the same time, there is no writer like her. She's utterly brilliant.

**Q:** How do you decide what to read next?

**A:** It never feels exactly like a decision. Books fall into my lap, or my inbox.

**Q:** Do you remember the first book that made an impact on you?

**A:** Probably the most influential book of my childhood was "Eloise," by Kay Thompson and Hilary Knight. I loved everything about it: the fantasy of living in a hotel, the underlying melancholy of a child raised by a nanny, the playing with form. Pages that fold out because the story can't be confined! And I loved how complicated Eloise herself is, with her uncombed hair, her gumption, her dark imagination, her big heart and bad behavior.

**Q:** Is there a book or type of book you're reluctant to read?

**A:** Massive books that take place before 1400. I'm not proud of this. I do love "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," which takes place in the 15th century.

**Q:** Can you recall a book that felt like it was written with you in mind (or conversely, one that most definitely wasn't)?

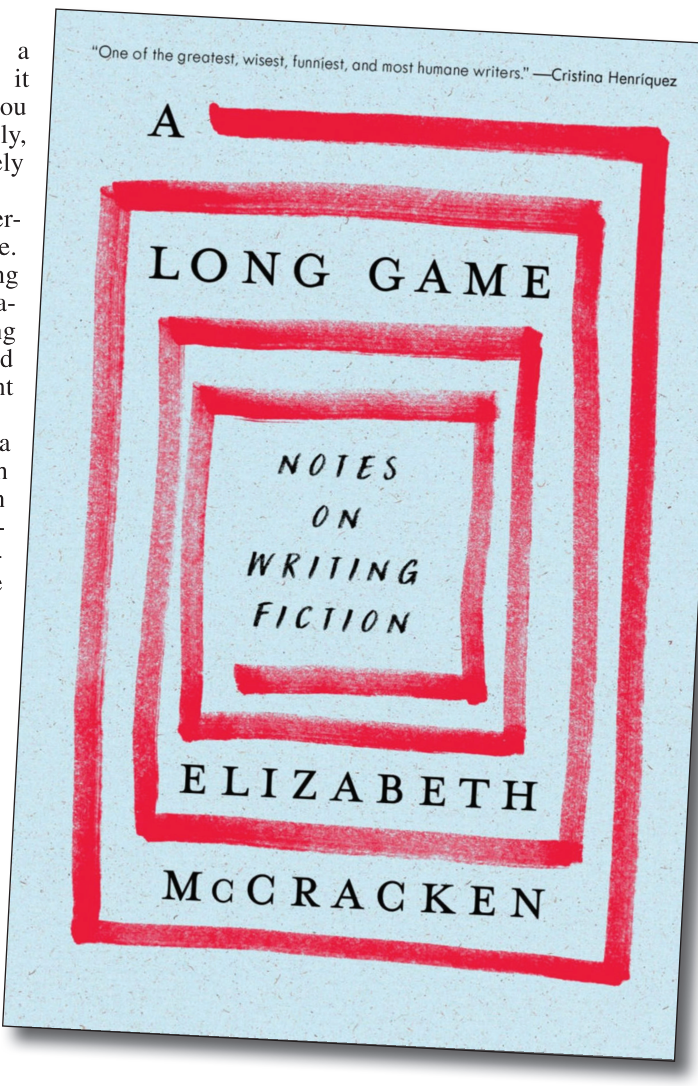
**A:** All of Lucia Berlin's stories sing to me.

**Q:** What's something – a fact, a bit of dialogue or something else – that has stayed with you from a recent reading?

**A:** In "Monster of a Land," Lauren Hough says people in Austin join polycules because they've forgotten they can join the Elks Club.

**Q:** Do you have any favorite book covers?

**A:** "Edith Holler" by Edward Carey, which (like most of his covers) features his artwork. I think the contents of his books are brilliant, too, but somehow it feels less stomach-turning to praise his covers in public than his writing.


"One of the greatest, wisest, funniest, and most humane writers." —Cristina Henriquez
A
LONG GAME
NOTES ON WRITING FICTION
ELIZABETH
McCRACKEN

HarperCollins / TNS

**Q:** Do you listen to audiobooks? If so, are there any titles or narrators you'd recommend?

**A:** I listen to audiobooks only sometimes, and mostly on long car rides. I absolutely love the audiobooks of Phillip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy.

**Q:** Is there a genre or type of book you read the most – and what would you like to read more of?

**A:** I read mostly "literary" novels and short stories, whatever that means. I would like to read more books in translation.

**Q:** Do you have a favorite book or books?

**A:** I change my mind with the wind.

**Q:** Which books are you planning to read next?

**A:** "The Rest of Our Lives," by Benjamin Markovits.

**Q:** Do you have a favorite character or quote from a book?

**A:** I think Betsy Trotwood, from "David Copperfield," is my all-time favorite character. People sometimes say that Dickens was terrible at writing women. He could be terrible at writing young women, but Miss Havisham (from "Great Expectations"), Miss Flite (from "Bleak House") and Jane Murdstone and Betsy Trotwood (from "David Copperfield") are all immortal.

**Q:** Is there a person who made an impact on your reading life – a teacher, a parent, a librarian or someone else?

**A:** I was very lucky to have been surrounded by bookish people all my life, at home, at school, and at the library – I worked in my local public library from 15 to 22, and eventually got a degree in library science – but my mother always told me that my brother, Harry, taught me to read, aided by "Sesame Street." So I'll say Harry McCracken, my beloved older brother.

**Q:** What do you find the most appealing in a book: the plot, the language, the cover, a recommendation? Do you have any examples?

**A:** Always language; terrible sentences are the one thing I can't overlook.

**Q:** Are you someone who must finish every book you start – or is it OK toput down the ones you don't connect with?

**A:** I used to finish every book I got five pages into; I felt, and still feel, that it's useful for writers to read work they don't love, and there's also joy in being won over by a book you're not sure about. Still, these days, if I can't bear a book, I stop.

**Q:** What's a memorable book experience – good or bad – you're willing to share?

**A:** Years ago, I was the first person to ever read my friend Ann Patchett's "Bel Canto." I sat up at the bar in a place in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I don't generally like barstools, and yet I didn't notice anything but what was happening in the book. I swear I still remember the angle of the light through the window and my own angle to the bar, because I was reading something I knew was changing me, and would change everyone who read it.

**Q:** Is there a book that tapped into an emotion you didn't expect?

**A:** Paul Lisicky's "Song So Wild and Blue," about his relationship to the music of Joni Mitchell, made me understand what it is like to listen to music with a musician's ear, which I would have thought was impossible for me.

**Q:** Do you have a favorite bookstore or bookstore experience?

**A:** Austin is full of astounding independent bookstores, but BookWoman has a special place in my heart: it saw me through the pandemic, with its curbside service; it didn't close a single day.

**Q:** What's something about your book that no one knows?

**A:** I have only just remembered that I composed the first draft in Scrivener, which many people I respect swear by. It is a program that organizes books. Apparently, exosomatic organization doesn't suit me.

**Q:** If you could ask your readers something, what would it be?

**A:** I would ask for book recommendations.

## BESTSELLERS

*Here are the bestsellers for the week that ended Saturday, Jan. 31, compiled from data from independent and chain bookstores, book wholesalers and independent distributors nationwide, powered by Circana BookScan.*

### Hardcover fiction

1. The Correspondent. Virginia Evans. Crown
2. Vigil. George Saunders. Random House
3. Half His Age. Jennette McCurdy. Ballantine
4. Pendergast. Preston/Child. Grand Central
5. Jojo's Bizarre Adventure: Steel Ball Run, Vol. 5. Hirohiko Araki. Viz
6. Burn Down Master's House. Clay Cane. Dafina
7. The Widow. John Grisham. Doubleday
8. Her Soul for Revenge (deluxe ed.). Harley Laroux. Kensington
9. Alchemised. SenLinYu. Del Rey
10. My Husband's Wife. Alice Feeney. Pine & Cedar

### Hardcover nonfiction

1. The Invisible Coup. Peter Schweizer. Harper
2. The Forever Strong Playbook. Gabrielle Lyon. Atria
3. Stop, in the Name of God. Charlie Kirk. Winning Team
4. Mattering. Jennifer Breheny Wallace. Portfolio
5. The Way of Excellence. Brad Stulberg. HarperOne
6. Of Course It's Good! Jessica Secrest. Page Street
7. Big Bites: Time to Eat! Kat Ashmore. Rodale
8. Your Roots Don't Define You. Chris Appleton. Hanover Square
9. Where We Keep the Light. Josh Shapiro. Harper
10. The Official We Do Not Care Club Handbook. Melani Sanders. Harvest

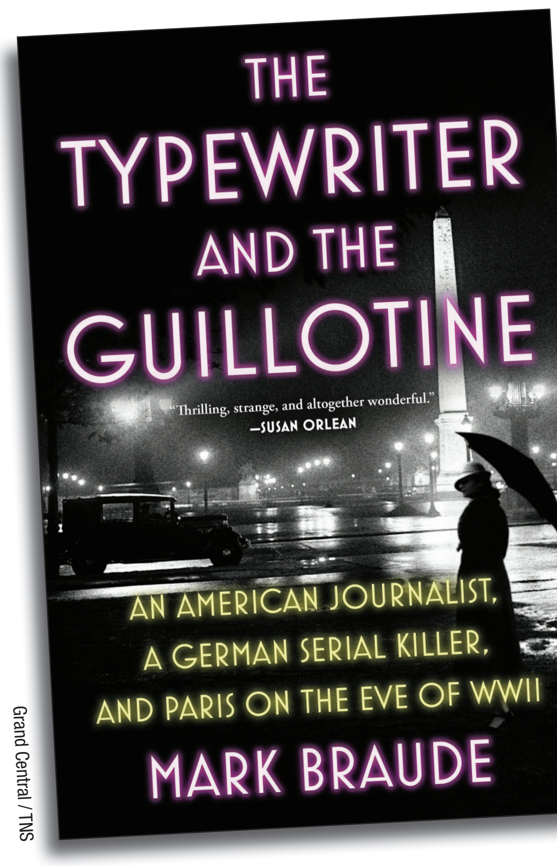
### Trade paperback

1. Dear Debbie. Freida McFadden. Poisoned Pen
2. Woman Down. Colleen Hoover. Montlake
3. Theo of Golden. Allen Levi. Atria
4. Dungeon Crawler Carl. Matt Dinniman. Ace
5. Play Along. Liz Tomforde. Amara
6. The God of the Woods. Liz Moore. Riverhead
7. Forged by Malice. Elizabeth Helen. Bloom
8. The Housemaid. Freida McFadden. Grand Central
9. Dove. Paisley Hope. Sourcebooks Casablanca
10. Remarkably Bright Creatures. Shelby Van Pelt. Ecco

*Reprinted from Publishers Weekly.*

**REVIEW**

## A WW II serial killer in 'The Typewriter and the Guillotine'


THE
TYPEWRITER
AND THE
GUILLOTINE
"Thrilling, strange, and altogether wonderful." —SUSAN ORLEAN
AN AMERICAN JOURNALIST,
A GERMAN SERIAL KILLER,
AND PARIS ON THE EVE OF WWII
MARK BRAUDE

Grand Central / TNS

**By CHRIS HEWITT**
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

One half of "The Typewriter and the Guillotine" is compelling, and it's probably not the half you'd think.

"The Typewriter" part of Mark Braude's account of midcentury Paris is the better part (and it's actually about 80 percent of the book). It's about American Janet Flanner, who was hired to write "Letter from Paris" columns for a brand-new magazine, the New Yorker, in 1925, with virtually no knowledge of France or journalism. She ended up writing versions of the column for the next 50 years.

Braude, whose last book ("Kiki Man Ray: Art, Love and Rivalry in 1920s Paris") featured some of the same real-life characters as "Typewriter," skillfully recaptures the glittering milieu in which Flanner was constantly partying with Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway or some other luminary.

He captures the strengths of Flanner's work, which began with an inventive, curious mind but deepened as she gradually refined her writing skills. She was careful to keep herself out of her columns in the early years but soon became a sharp observer of the tactics with which Hitler absorbed much of Europe: "Everything that is happening in Europe now is happening according to the characters, rather than the politics, of a few leading men. What is taking place here is psychology, not history. History will come later." Eventually, like Edward R. Murrow, Flanner saw her job as waking up the world to horrors it was trying to ignore.

"Typewriter" also unpacks Flanner's complicated love life, which included an early marriage to a man and then multiple, frequently overlapping, relationships with women. And it tracks her growing awareness of her power. Excerpts from Flanner's letters to her bosses back in New York reveal her to be hard-working, argumentative and self-deprecating – a mighty appealing combo. Before I read the book, I knew next to nothing about Flanner, other than her byline, and now I want to know even more.

I have no behind-the-scenes knowledge of the creation of the book but it reads like it started out as a biography of Flanner into which Braude inserted blah serial killer sections in an attempt to duplicate the Erik Larson formula of two contemporaneous storylines that gradually wind around each other, as demonstrated by nonfiction bestsellers "The Devil in the White City" and "Thunderstruck."

The other storyline deals with a German con man named Eugen Weidmann, the guillotine, who must be the dullest and most hapless serial killer ever. Essentially, his victims are random people who get in his way and whose bodies are almost immediately discovered. The brevity of these infrequent Weidmann chapters, which are often just a page or two long, attests to how little there is to be said about "The Guillotine" and his crimes.

Flanner and Weidmann's paths did cross – she wrote about the police investigation and may have attended parts of his trial – but the connection feels tenuous.

Honestly, "The Typewriter and the Guillotine" would be a better book without the Weidmann chapters. As a reader, it would be easy enough to skip right past them and get to the good stuff about fascinating Flanner.

# AUTOMOTIVE

AUTO REVIEW

## A hybrid SUV so good, your neighbors will think you've received a promotion

**By LARRY PRINTZ**
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Photos by Drew Phillips / Hyundai / TNS

The 2026 Hyundai Palisade Hybrid is what happens when a sensible accountant, a sleep-deprived suburban parent, and an environmentalist agree to stop arguing long enough to design a car. It is a large, polite, reassuring automobile that should easily woo buyers, except those who believe cars should be difficult, loud, or French.

From a distance, the Palisade Hybrid looks like a well-tailored refrigerator. Up close, it looks like a well-tailored refrigerator with aspirations. It's boxier, more upright, yet more aerodynamic than before, because even brick walls benefit from wind-tunnel time. The Palisade is now 2.5 inches longer with 2.7 inches more wheelbase, which means the third row has been upgraded from FAA-compliant punishment to something approaching human dignity. Cargo space improves too, which is useful for hauling the emotional baggage of modern family life.

There's also a new XRT Pro package, which Hyundai claims boosts off-road capability. What it really does is allow suburban drivers to look rugged while fearlessly tackling snow-covered cul-de-sacs, muddy soccer fields, and the occasional gravel road. It's a triumph of image over necessity, which makes it perfectly American.

The word Hyundai keeps whispering and shouting is more. More tech. More driver assists. More luxury. And, most notably, more drivetrain options, including the Palisade's first hybrid. And while the Palisade hasn't been reinvented from scratch, nearly everything that matters has been improved, tweaked or at least polished. Even the base trims get a generous helping of new features, while the top-of-the-line Calligraphy test vehicle goes full Korean luxury spa, including massaging second-row seats, so your children can arrive at school more relaxed than you are.

The big headline, though, is the hybrid drivetrain. The Palisade Hybrid pairs a turbocharged 2.5-liter four-cylinder with dual electric motors and a modest battery, producing a combined 329 horsepower and 339 pound-feet of torque. Towing drops slightly to 4,000 pounds, which is still enough to haul a boat, camper or extended family grudges.

Fuel economy is wonderful, topping out at an EPA-estimated 34 mpg combined, roughly what you'd expect from something much smaller and much less capable. Even fully loaded with all-wheel drive, the Palisade Hybrid stays impressively efficient. This allows owners to feel morally superior while burning fossil fuels, which is one of the great compromises of modern life, right up there with sugar-free donuts.

On the road, the Palisade Hybrid is calm, stable, and emotionally unavailable. It weighs over two-a-half tons, yet electric torque disguises this nicely, delivering brisk launches and confident freeway merges in states where hesitation is treated as a character flaw. The steering is light, the ride plush, and the suspension absorbing potholes with the weary acceptance of a man who has seen worse and knows resistance is futile. It will not inspire you. It will, however, transport your family without tears, which is a greater achievement than most religions.

Drive modes abound, including Snow, Sand, and Mud for all-wheel-drive models, helping distribute torque when conditions turn biblical. There's also a clever feature that lets the Palisade act as a rolling power bank while parked, useful for camping, tailgating, or running an espresso machine in the wilderness, because you can't enjoy nature without first plugging something into it.

Inside, the cabin is bigger, softer, and determined to prove Hyundai now understands luxury. Materials feel expensive, even when they're clearly plastic doing a convincing impression of wood that once knew a forest. Seating for eight remains standard, captain's chairs optional, and it feels thoughtfully assembled by people who have ridden in German cars and taken notes.

The dashboard is a glowing expanse of screens that convey critical information such as speed, navigation, and which child in the third row is currently winning the sibling war. A wide panoramic display combines twin 12.3-inch screens, running an updated infotainment system with wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto. Best of all, Hyundai resists the touchscreen tyranny sweeping the industry by keeping real buttons for climate and audio controls. This alone deserves a standing ovation.

Tech features pile up: Alexa integration, USB-C ports everywhere, available dash cams, wireless charging, a UV phone sanitizer (because germs are the new terrorists), and an off-road forward ground view camera that makes the hood effectively disappear. It's especially handy if you plan to take your XRT Pro somewhere more adventurous than Target.

In the end, the 2026 Hyundai Palisade is exactly what modern buyers want: bigger, smarter, more efficient, more luxurious, and more convinced of its own importance. It's not quite full-size, but it's close enough that your neighbors will assume you've been promoted. And in America, that's what an SUV is for.

*Larry Printz is an automotive journalist based in South Florida.*

### 2026 Hyundai Palisade

**Base price:** $44,160-$58,780

**Engine:** Turbocharged 2.5-liter four-cylinder hybrid

**Horsepower/Torque:** 329/339 pound-feet

**EPA rating (combined city/highway):** 34 mpg

**Fuel required:** Regular

**Length/Width/Height:** 199/78/70 inches

**Ground clearance:** 7.4 inches

**Payload:** 1,377 pounds

**Cargo capacity:** 19-87 cubic feet

**Towing capacity:** 4,000 pounds

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## Slinky Crown Signia is the cure for the common Toyota SUV

**By HENRY PAYNE**
The Detroit News (TNS)

The station wagon is back. And from an unlikely source.

My Toyota Crown Signia is long, sleek and roomy. Remove the badge and you might mistake the profile for the Volvo V90 Cross Country or Audi A6 Allroad, European stalwarts in the midsize wagon business. While wagons are common across the Atlantic pond, we Yanks prefer boxy, lifted SUVs – thus the limited offerings from the likes of Volvo and Audi.

Now comes Signia, the midsize cure for the common Toyota SUV.

Crown Signia makes a striking contrast to other SUVs in the midsize, two-row segment like the VW Atlas Cross Sport, Honda Passport and Chevy Blazer. Its looks beg to be compared with premium models like the Buick Envision and the Acura RDX. Signia is also a striking departure from Toyota's more typical Japanese-market bias toward full-size sedans. The Crown Signia is the SUV/wagon doppelganger to the Crown sedan.

Mark me down with a preference for Signia.

It's not just the added utility of the wagon's palatial cargo bay; the Signia is better looking than the awkward-looking Crown sedan. Toyota has pulled off European wagon proportions with the Signia SUV. The Crown sedan? Not so much.

Taking cues from Toyota's new design halo, the Prius hatchback (never thought I'd say that 20 years ago), the Signia's hood tapers to a simple fascia with narrow headlight graphics. Its flanks are clean, sweeping back to an equally simple rear with thin, horizontal taillight graphics. Toyota, take a walk down the Milan fashion runway.

It's a very different design language than luxury cousin Lexus, with the latter's Darth Vader grilles and L-shaped design cues everywhere. Like the simple lines of Volvo, Porsche and others, the Toyota will last the test of time. An exception to this design discipline is a front cheese-grater grille. It's unnecessarily busy, and its blizzard of holes will be a nightmare to clean after you've picked up a cloud-full of gnats on a long road trip up north.

That aside, the design elegance continues inside with a broad, hoodless screen that houses both digital instrument and infotainment displays. General Motors, a master of ergonomics, does these screens best with. For example, the Buick Envision which conveniently locates secondary controls like automatic lights and head-up display (once obscured in the dark quarter panel above your left knee) in-screen.

The Toyota's screens are slow relative to rivals like Buick and Hyundai, which were early innovators in electronics and integrated Android Auto and Apple CarPlay phone app technology. The Toyota even maintains a native navigation system where rivals have moved on to either prioritizing Google Maps through phone apps (Hyundai, Honda) or Google Built-in (Chevrolet).

"Navigate to Uncle Joe's Chicken, Southfield, Michigan," I barked and the system ... had no idea what I was saying.

Thank goodness for the Android Auto alternative, which navigated me to my destination while playing my favorite news/music stations off my Sirius XM app phone subscription.

Needless to say, Signia only comes with an automatic transmission. Only the GR Corolla and GR86 sports cars have manuals in the Toyota fleet. One of my favorite trends in the age of electronic, automatic transmissions is the move to minimalist monostable shifters. Think Porsche, VW and BMW "chicklet" shifters.

The Signia adopts the Prius's (there's that halo car again) monostable shifter, which is not only a cinch to use – a flick of the wrist gets you between PARK, DRIVE and REVERSE – but opens up console space for cupholders and a deep wireless charging box for your phone (important for keeping it juiced while, ahem, navigating on Android Auto).

Indeed, Signia is a Prius in a midsize wagon body.

HRRRRRRR! went the gas-electric powertrain with CVT transmission as I put my foot into it down Telegraph Road. HRRRRR! went the Pirus when I put my foot into it this summer. Once the industry Nerdmobile, Prius is the model for an all-hybrid lineup.

The difference between the Crown Signia and Prius is the bigger wagon gains 54 horsepower over the 2.0-liter Prius thanks to the wagon's bigger displacement, 2.5-liter four-cylinder.

Crown Signia has similar driving dynamics to its compact cousin – tidy but hardly European. Hatchback fans won't mistake a Prius for a Golf GTI, and neither does Signia rival Audi A6 Allroad. But it is more than an inch lower to the ground than Toyota's midsize Highlander SUV, and drives with more poise as a result.

Alas, Crown Signia's engine droned like a senator in the middle of a 24-hour filibuster. More exciting was the Toyota's 37 mpg and 551 miles of driving range – the latter figure more than double the 222-mile range of its electric bZ sibling.

No wonder Toyota has been lukewarm on EVs.

Though gas-powered, Toyota hybrids still come with some inconveniences – most notably the lack of a spare tire in back. Battery components rob the rear hatch of the necessary space for a spare. Stranded? Signia provides only a tire repair kit. A Honda Passport, on the other hand, is more off-road focused and therefore prioritizes a spare tire. If you plan on off-roading, keep that in mind.

True to its sleek proportions and impressive fuel economy, the Signia carves out a niche as a trip-friendly cruiser for families with an eye on design. And with just 10,263 units sold last year in SUV Nation, you're likely to have a unique car in the neighborhood.

Kind of like the Volvo X90 wagon owner down the street.

*Henry Payne is auto critic for The Detroit News.*

### 2026 Toyota Crown Signia
★★★★

**Vehicle type:** All-wheel-drive, five-passenger wagon

**Price:** $45,985, including $1,450 destination fee ($53,249 Limited model as tested)

**Powerplant:** Hybrid 2.5-liter inline-4 cylinder with three electric motors

**Power:** 240 horsepower

**Transmission:** Continuously variable automatic

**Performance:** 0-60 mph, 7.1 seconds (mfr.); towing, 2,700 pounds

**Weight:** 4,210 pounds

**Fuel economy:** EPA est. mpg 39 city/37 highway/38 combined; gas range, 551 miles

**Report card**

**Highs:** A looker; long trip range

**Lows:** Grille holes complicate cleaning; lags competitors in screen ergonomics

Henry Payne / The Detroit News / TNS

GADGETS

# New battery design puts safety at the forefront

**By GREGG ELLMAN**
Tribune News Service (TNS)

Safe portable charging isn't optional; it's essential. That is exactly what you get with BMX's new SolidSafe portable power line featuring advanced magnetic solid-state battery packs built with safety at the core.

Inside each battery is what SolidSafe calls next-generation solid-state cells, not traditional lithium-ion batteries. SolidSafe states that the new design eliminates flammable liquid electrolytes, thereby reducing fire, overheating and swelling risks associated with other portable batteries. This new battery style will give you up to twice the lifespan of other batteries.

To demonstrate the safety features, unique BMX testing of the new batteries included engineers drilling a fully charged SolidSafe unit straight through the battery, with no smoke, swelling or ignition. The drilling, cutting and bending demonstration was stated to underscore the resilience of solid-state chemistry, which resists overheating, leaking, and swelling even when subjected to physical damage.

BMX stated on their site that SolidSafe batteries have significantly less liquid electrolyte than traditional lithium-ion power banks. This will reduce conditions that can lead to thermal runaway and fire. Testing showed that the stress that would normally cause lithium-ion batteries to ignite did not occur with the new design.

Among the new batteries is the **SolidSafe 5K** (5,000 mAh), with a single USB-C port and Qi2 magnetic (wireless) charging for Qi-enabled devices. You'll get up to 15 watts of charging from the Qi2 and 30 watts with the in/out USB-C port. Two devices can be charged at once, and it is rated for over 1,000 charging cycles.

There is a full-color LCD display at the bottom of the SolidSafe 5K ($79), showing the output power and the remaining power in the battery. An attached USB-C lanyard is included for charging your devices or recharging the battery, and the battery supports pass-through charging. The slim, 0.46-inch body is built with an aluminum housing, designed for natural heat dissipation and durability.

The new line of batteries also includes a **10K** ($99) and **10K+** ($129) model, all with 15-watt Qi2 magnetic wireless charging, 30W USB-C fast in/out, an LCD display, and a USB-C lanyard cable. Qi2 (15 watts) is up to twice as fast as Qi1 (7.5 watts) models. The 10K+ model has a built-in microSD memory card port.

BMX says on their site that the new SolidSafe portable batteries meet TSA power bank regulations to carry on airplanes. The products are covered by a 2-year limited warranty.

*https://www.heybmx.com/collections/solid-state-power-banks, available in black, blue, orange, or silver*

……

Tessan's AC-powered **TS-CS03 9-in-1 desktop charging station** charges all your devices simultaneously and is designed for vertical, space-saving use.

The high-speed charger is built like a mini tower with ports on the sides, including three AC outlets, three USB-A ports, and three USB-C ports. It can supply up to 100 watts of power delivery, and with USB-C, it will deliver 65-watt fast charging up to five times faster than a regular USB port. Tessan testing shows it charges a cell phone to 80 percent in as little as 30 minutes.

It is built with GaN III technology (Gallium Nitride) to ensure a safe, energy-efficient charge with dynamic temperature sensors for heat management. Protective safety features include protection against overcharging, overcurrent, over-voltage and over-amperage. The body of the TS-CS03 is built with flame-retardant material.

The portable charging tower stands about five inches high and has a flat base that fits in the palm of your hand. It includes anti-slip rubber feet to keep it in place. A five-foot AC adapter is included to power the charging station for phones, laptops, tablets, game controllers, digital cameras or anything that needs a boost. The Tessan site has an extensive chart showing power distribution by the ports you are using.

*https://tessan.com/products/tessan-100w-desk-charging-station, $41.99*

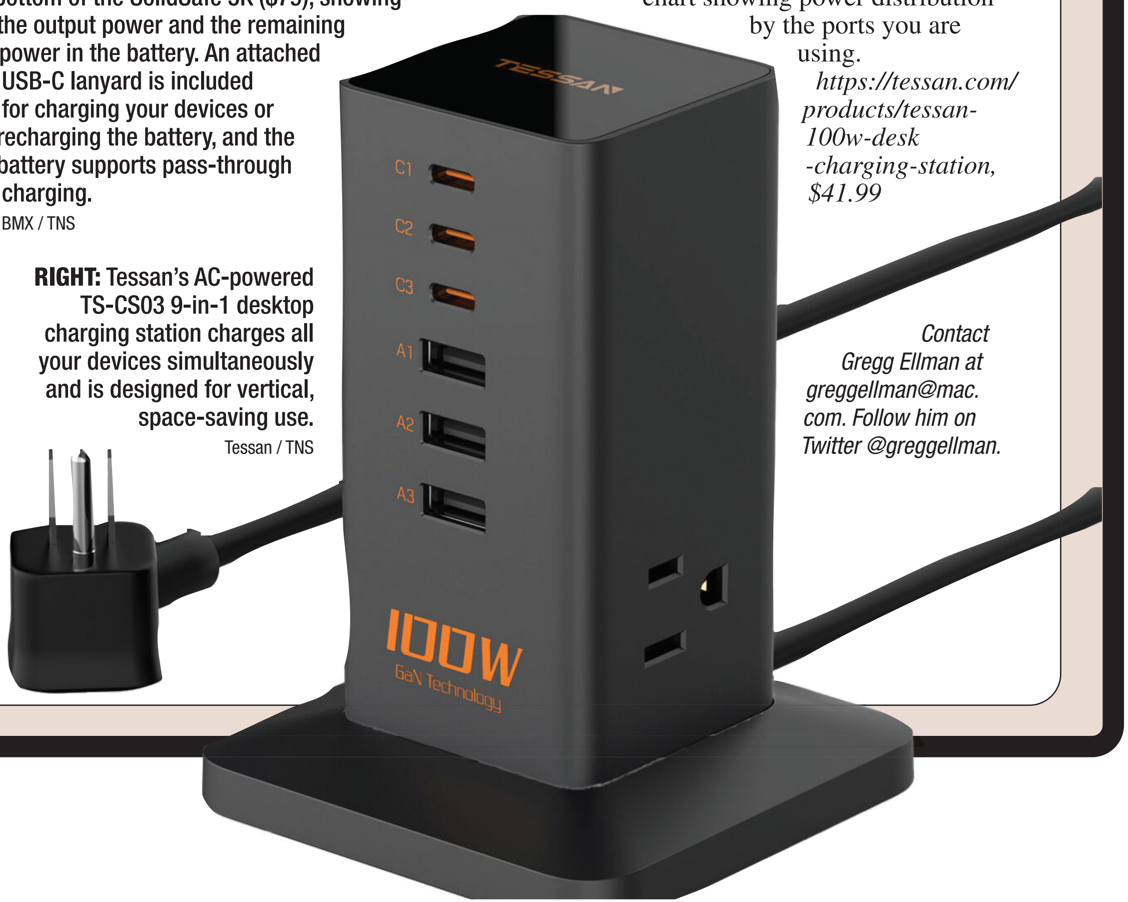
*Contact Gregg Ellman at greggellman@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter @greggellman.*

BMX
BMX
www.bmxstore.cc

**BMX stated on their site that SolidSafe batteries have significantly less liquid electrolyte than traditional lithium-ion power banks. This will reduce conditions that can lead to thermal runaway and fire.**
BMX / TNS

BMX
BMX
www.bmxstore.cc

**LEFT:** There is a full-color LCD display at the bottom of the SolidSafe 5K ($79), showing the output power and the remaining power in the battery. An attached USB-C lanyard is included for charging your devices or recharging the battery, and the battery supports pass-through charging.
BMX / TNS



**RIGHT:** Tessan's AC-powered TS-CS03 9-in-1 desktop charging station charges all your devices simultaneously and is designed for vertical, space-saving use.
Tessan / TNS

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# Hidden phone setting turns screen into a 'photo negative'

**By JIM ROSSMAN**
Tribune News Service (TNS)

My family is a great resource for my column topics.

Usually, I write about an issue brought to my attention by my mom or my mother-in-law, but this week it was my sister who called with a phone problem.

We'd talked earlier in the week and she told me her phone screen looked strange: the background was black and the text was white in some of her apps, like Messages.

To me, this sounded like her phone had switched into dark mode, which inverts the text and background colors, as she described. I had to get off the phone, so I told her how to check the setting and to reboot her phone and let me know if the problem persisted.

She didn't call me back that night, so I thought her problem was fixed. But when I talked to her later in the week, she mentioned it was still happening, and that in some apps, photos and videos looked like a negative image, where all the colors were inverted. She sent along a screen shot of her Wyze app and sure enough, the thumbnail images were reversed.

This is something I've seen before. It is an Accessibility setting, but it was usually set that way on purpose.

I told her to open her phone's settings and then open Accessibility and then open Display & Text Size setting.

I asked her to tell me if any setting on that page was turned on, and she told me Smart Invert was turned on. I was hoping that was the case.

Smart Invert reverses the colors of the display except for images, media and some apps that use dark color styles.

Turning off Smart Invert fixed my sister's issues, but I was at a loss to tell her how that setting had turned itself on.

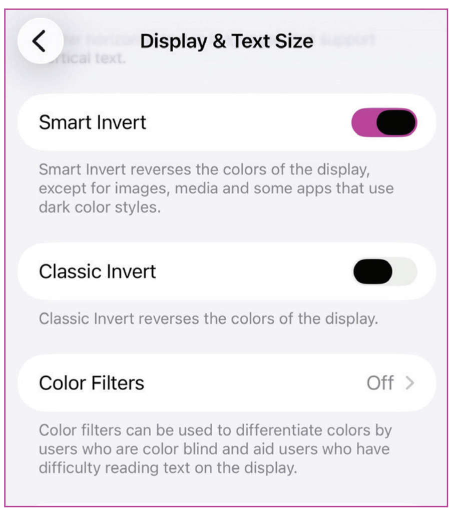
The iOS operating system does let a user set up an "accessibility shortcut" that will turn on or off one of the accessibility settings by triple-clicking the sleep/wake button. I suppose it is possible smart invert was set to activate with a triple click and that she'd never triple clicked before.

I showed her how to check the setting if the problem should ever come back.

This is a good time to mention iOS and Android both have a plethora of accessibility settings for people who need assistance with vision (text magnification or better contrast) or hearing issues (live captions) or who need assistance using the touch screen accurately or some other issues.

If you haven't looked through your phone's accessibility settings, I recommend it. Familiarize yourself with what's available, even if you don't have a current need. It might help you or a family member in the future.

*Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantechadviser@gmail.com.*



Display & Text Size

Smart Invert ●

Smart Invert reverses the colors of the display, except for images, media and some apps that use dark color styles.

Classic Invert ○

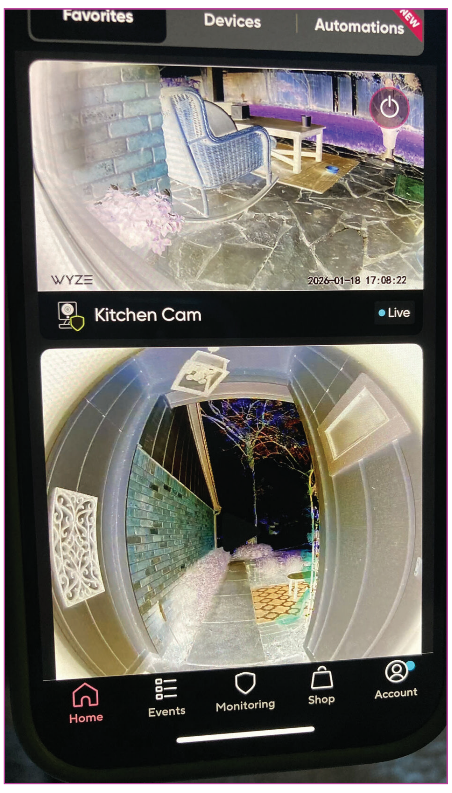
Classic Invert reverses the colors of the display.

Color Filters Off >

Color filters can be used to differentiate colors by users who are color blind and aid users who have difficulty reading text on the display.

Jim Rossman / TNS

**Smart Invert reverses the colors of the display except for images, media and some apps that use dark color styles.**



Linda Rossman / TNS

**Smart Invert reverses the colors of the display except for images, media and some apps that use dark color styles.**

Mininyx Doodle via Getty images

# Doctors increasingly see AI scribes in a positive light, *but hiccups persist*

**By MICHELLE ANDREWS**
KFF Health News (TNS)

When Jeannine Urban went in for a checkup in November, she had her doctor's full attention.

Instead of typing on her computer keyboard during the exam, Urban's primary care physician at the Penn Internal Medicine practice in Media, Pennsylvania, had an ambient artificial intelligence scribe take notes. At the end of the 30-minute visit, Urban's doctor showed her the AI summary of the appointment, neatly organized into sections for her medical history, the physical exam findings, and an assessment and treatment plan for her rheumatoid arthritis and hot flashes, among other details.

The clinical note, which Urban could also review on the patient portal at home, was incredibly thorough, she said. It summarized all of her questions and concerns and the doctor's responses. The scribe "made sure we didn't miss anything," Urban said.

Ambient AI scribes are being hailed by physicians as a game changer that helps free them to focus on their patients rather than their computer keyboard. By releasing doctors from the onerous and time-consuming task of documenting what happens during every patient encounter, early studies show, AI scribes may help reduce physician burnout and after-hours "pajama time" catching up on work in the evening.

The potential of AI to transform every aspect of the health care system – from patient care to clinical efficiency to medical innovation – is an area of intense focus, including by the Trump administration.

Last January, President Donald Trump issued an executive order to remove barriers to American leadership in AI. Later in the year, a press release from the federal Department of Health and Human Services invited stakeholders to weigh in on how the department can accelerate the adoption of AI in health care.

Several startup vendors in recent years have introduced ambient AI scribe products that can be integrated into electronic health records. EHR market leader Epic is piloting its own AI scribe technology, which it expects to release widely early this year, according to Jackie Gerhart, a family medicine physician who is chief medical officer and vice president of clinical informatics at Epic.

Health tech experts estimate that a third of providers have access to ambient AI scribe technology. As adoption looks likely to grow rapidly over the next few years, many expect it to become more of a recruiting tool, a minimum requirement for incoming clinicians, who reports indicate are increasingly prioritizing work-life balance.

"It's part of keeping doctors happy," said Robert Wachter, a professor and the chair of the Department of Medicine at the University of California-San Francisco, whose forthcoming book, A Giant Leap , explores how AI is transforming health care. "Health systems that initially might have done a hard-nosed return-on-investment calculation – many are softening on that and realizing that the cost of recruiting and retaining doctors is pretty high."

But many questions remain. Does the use of ambient AI scribes improve patient care and health outcomes? Will doctors use time they gain by employing an AI scribe to improve the quality of the time they spend with their patients or just boost the number of patients they see? To what extent will expanding the amount of detail available from a patient visit lead to bigger bills if the AI scribe is integrated with a coding app that optimizes provider charges?

For now, these questions remain mostly unanswered.

Urban said that the AI scribe didn't change her experience as a patient very much. Typically, after a patient gives verbal permission, the AI scribe records the visit on a phone and organizes the conversation into the structure of a clinical note, filtering out small talk that isn't pertinent to the medical visit but incorporating relevant details about a family member's recent cancer diagnosis, for example. The scribe's note is often then integrated into the provider's EHR. The doctor later reviews the note and signs off on it.

Even though the visit may not feel very different to patients, some clinicians report that ambient AI scribes are changing patient encounters in unanticipated ways.

"Now, when I'm doing a physical exam, I have to say what I'm doing and what I'm finding out loud in order for the AI scribe to document it," said Dina Capalongo, Urban's primary care doctor. "People find that very interesting," she said.

When Capalongo places her stethoscope over the carotid artery under a patient's jaw, for example, she might say that she doesn't hear a "bruit," or vascular murmur, whose presence could indicate atherosclerosis. Patients have told her, "I never knew why a doctor would listen there," she said.

Saying things out loud for the AI scribe that would typically appear only in a clinical note can create its own set of challenges, particularly during sensitive physical exams. Doctors may feel it's important to adjust their conversation accordingly.

"Sometimes patients are anxious and scared and my saying things that they don't understand or they may worry about during an uncomfortable examination does not help the situation and honestly is insensitive to what the patient is going through," said Genevieve Melton-Meaux, a professor in the Division of Colon and Rectal Surgery at the University of Minnesota, who is also chief health informatics and AI officer at Fairview Health Services in Minneapolis. "I'll keep that top of mind and make sure I record it" after the visit.

"How we have conversations with patients about these tools is really important, in particular for maintaining trust and ensuring accurate information," Melton-Meaux said.

Studies have found that, across a range of measures such as completeness, timeliness, and coherence, the notes created by ambient AI scribes are generally at least as good as, and sometimes better than, traditional documentation, said Kevin Johnson, a pediatrician who is vice president for applied informatics at the University of Pennsylvania Health System.

An ongoing concern is around AI "hallucinations," in which false, sometimes fabricated information appears in an AI output.

Kaiser Permanente, an early adopter of ambient AI scribe technology, provides it to more than 25,000 doctors, advanced practice providers, and pharmacists systemwide. It has found hallucinations to be "quite rare," said Daniel Yang, an internist who is vice president of AI and emerging technologies at KP.

But they happen. An AI-scribe-generated note, for instance, might say that the doctor planned to refer someone to a neurologist or to follow up in two weeks. The problem? The doctor might not have said that.

"The technology is not perfect, and that's why physicians are reviewing it," Yang said. It's learning from regular physician visits as it goes, he said. That's why having a person check the work product is critical.

Still, even such a "human-in-the loop" system is fraught, Wachter said. "Humans stink at maintaining vigilance over time," he said.

As the use of ambient AI scribes becomes routine, some clinicians worry that the technology will widen the divide between health care haves and have-nots.

Large health systems are able to move forward with the technology, Melton-Meaux said. But what about critical access hospitals or small private practices? "There need to be more resources," she said.

Physicians' enthusiasm for ambient AI scribes stands in sharp contrast to their negative reaction to electronic health record systems that have become widely adopted in recent years to replace paper charts.

"During the last 10 years, when EHRs became a thing, we all became very grumpy, overworked data scribes," Wachter said.

The introduction of AI scribes makes physicians feel like technology is working for them rather than the other way around, health care AI experts said.

And AI scribes are "training wheels" for more consequential adoption of AI in health care, Wachter said.

To improve health care value and save costs, Wachter said, we need a system that makes it more likely that physicians will practice evidence-based medicine to order the right tests and prescribe the right medications.

"It's a few years away, but it's all AI-dependent," he said.

Epic has introduced roughly 60 AI use cases for patients, clinicians, and administration, with over 100 more in the works.

"It's so much bigger than a scribe," said Epic's Gerhart. "It's literally listening and acting in a way that tees things up for me so that I can take action."

*KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs of KFF – the independent source for health policy research, polling and journalism.*

Paxton Media Group

E-edition EXTRA

HOME&GARDEN

A kitchen with white traditional cabinetry is paired with a marble countertop with subtle gray veining.
Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes / TNS

**TOP LEFT:** Gray cabinetry paired with black fixtures and a white countertops creates a modern, yet traditional vibe. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Two tone cabinetry creates an ultra-modern look in this industrial space.

**DESIGN RECIPES**

# Kitchen trends

**By CATHY HOBBS**
Tribune News Service (TNS)

This is shaping up as a "back to basics" year for kitchen trends. While technology and innovation remain top of mind, when it comes to trends that will shape renovations, timeless and elegant is taking center stage.

Kitchens are not only the heart of the home, but also where a homeowner will recoup the most value when it comes to home selling. As a result, today's homeowner is seeking style, function and value. To this end, trendy is out and timeless is in.

### Countertop materials

Gone are the days of high maintenance. Today's homeowner wants to renovate and be able to have a "worry-free" experience. Ceramics and man-made materials have advanced leaps and bounds in recent years, with it becoming difficult to tell porcelain from real stone.

### Trends in tile

Whenever possible, tile is used to make a design statement. Full backsplashes and cabinetry create a more high-end look than leaving large areas of drywall exposed. Countertop colors are understated and modern, with colors such as white, black and gray being the most popular.

### Cabinetry

While wood remains popular, charcoal gray and white remain the dominate color choices for kitchen cabinetry. The desire to mix wood with lacquer also remains on trend.

### Hardware

Brass continues to dominate over chrome and nickel. There is a newcomer to the hardware "finish" scene: the color black. Black is a popular color for hardware as it appeals to a large audience and can be "dressed up or dressed down" and is often viewed as luxurious.

*Cathy Hobbs is the owner of Cathy Hobbs Design Recipes, a home staging company based in New York City (www.cathyhobbs.com). She is also the owner of Highland Passive House, a Home Staging + Design Center based in New York's Hudson Valley (www.highlandpassivehouse.com). Cathy's practical, how-to design advice can also be found in her book, "Home Design Recipes."*

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# How should I budget for home projects?

**Angie Hicks**
Ask Angi

Budgeting is one of the most important skills a homeowner can have. Planning ahead and budgeting for home projects can help prevent unexpected costs and ensure your projects go smoothly from start to finish.

The first step when creating a budget is to evaluate the current state of your home and determine which projects need to be completed and when. Walk around your home as if you were a buyer, with a critical eye for things you want or need to change. Write down every potential project you want to complete – no project is too small (or large!).

Once you have your full project list, you can sort the projects from most to least important. Structural and safety projects, like roof repairs, smoke detector replacements, or rewiring, should be at the top of the list. Maintenance projects, like HVAC tuneups and gutter cleaning should be in the middle of the list. Finally, aesthetic projects, like painting, new countertops or updated fixtures, should be lower on the list. Then, do some research to figure out roughly how much each of these projects could cost. This is also the time you should determine how much you want to set aside for your home projects this year.

Many homeowners forget to set aside extra money for unexpected costs and emergency repairs. A good rule of thumb is to set aside 1 percent of the value of your home each year for maintenance and repairs. You should also set aside an additional 10 percent for each project in case unexpected costs pop up, like fixing water damage in the middle of a bathroom renovation. For example, if you tell your contractor that your project budget is $1,000, plan for the project to cost around $1,100.

Compare your project list to your budget to determine which projects fit within your budget. Try to complete as many of the top-priority (structural and safety) projects as possible. This will ensure you do the most important projects before moving on to the less critical, but often more fun, projects.

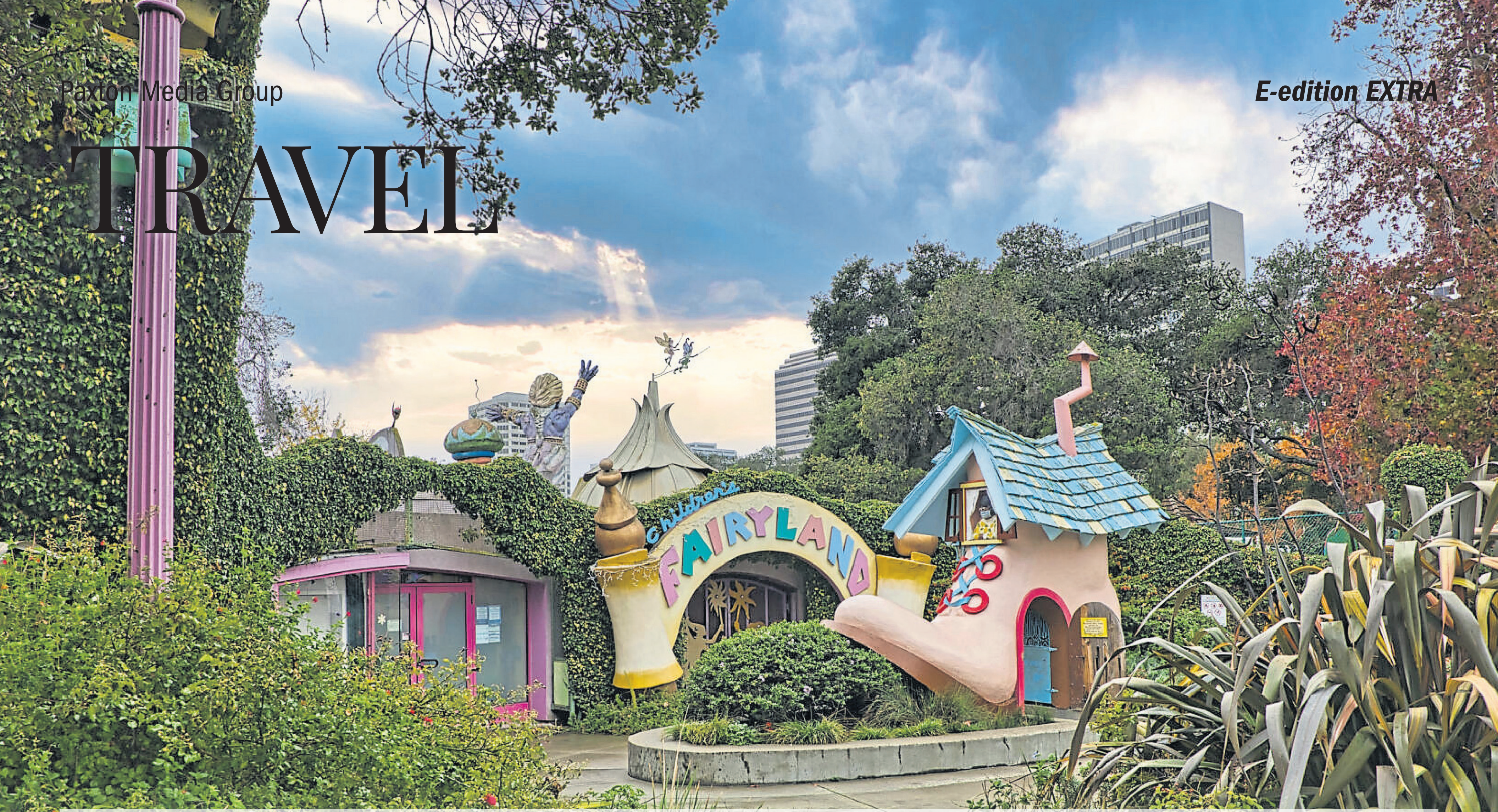
The first step when creating a budget is to evaluate the current state of your home and determine which projects need to be completed and when.
Tero Vesalainen / Dreamstime / TNS

If you are on the fence about whether a large project (roof replacement, foundation repair, etc.) fits in your budget this year, contact a contractor. Large-scale project costs depend on a lot of factors, so it's important to get a pro to quote your specific projects. Getting an in-person estimate from a local pro will give you the best information on your expected cost.

Staying on top of budgeting is the key to a well-maintained home. Budgeting consistently allows you to take better care of your home and avoid emergency costs.

*Tweet your home care questions with #AskingAngi and we'll try to answer them in a future column.*

# TRAVEL



# This theme park inspired Disneyland, Bob Baker Marionettes – and tickets are $19

**By TODD MARTENS**
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Jose Carlos Fajardo / Bay Area News Group / TNS

**Visitors board a boat with a disco ball inside as they attend the Fairy Winterland event at Children's Fairyland in Oakland, California, on Dec. 30, 2021.**

Since the beginning, guests at Children's Fairyland have been welcomed by a sculpture inspired by the nursery rhyme "There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe," now a pink, oversized ankle boot with a crooked roof and eye-popping, candy-like buttons. Today, the shoe is raised on a concrete, plant-adorned platform, but it originally sat flat on the ground, forcing grown-ups to duck to enter the park.

That was more than just a quirk of design. It was a mission statement.

The 10-acre garden wonderland, nestled around Oakland's urban sanctuary of Lake Merritt, has maintained one core rule since it opened its gates on Sept. 2, 1950: "No child without an adult, and no adult without a child." For Fairyland aims to show the world through the eyes of a young'un – a place filled with curiosity, but also perhaps a bit off-kilter, where one can walk into a whale and find a fishbowl, slide down a dragon and get lost in an "Alice in Wonderland" maze of cards.

And yet, for more than 75 years now, Fairyland has had a grown-up sized influence. Fairyland is considered the first "storybook"-style park in the country, launching a national fad. Legend has it that Walt Disney visited Fairyland while Disneyland was in the planning stages and was so taken with it that he poached some staff. Fairyland's "magic keys," which unlock audio tales throughout the park, were an innovation felt across numerous industries. And the park has been instrumental in the puppet space, home to what's said to be the oldest ongoing puppet-focused theater in the country. Those at L.A.'s own long-running Bob Baker Marionette Theater today cite Fairyland as an inspiration.

It is Fairyland's thesis that continues to feel revolutionary. And that's a belief that the way to understand, learn and grow is via the stories we tell one another, and those narratives need no fancy tech or digital accouterments.

"Families want simplicity," says Kymberly Miller, Fairyland's CEO. "They want to come in and be like, 'I feel really safe here.' It's a contained space. It's big but it's small. Kids can run around and make up things to do with the canvas of Fairyland."

To enter Fairyland, and it's estimated that about 150,000 people do each year, is to not just set foot into a handcrafted fantasyland but to also step back in time. It persists at a time theme parks have increasingly targeted a young market with a host of upscale tricks. Legoland, for instance, will this March open a new land in Lego Galaxy with a family roller coaster as its signature attraction. Also this year, the Universal Kids Resort is slated to open in Frisco, Texas. It's a smaller Universal Studios geared toward a younger audience but featuring cinematic brands such as "Shrek" and "Jurassic World."

The nonprofit Fairyland is downright quaint in comparison – tickets are under $20, with steeper discounts for Oakland residents. Surviving societal, technological and bureaucratic shifts, it's become the little park that could, its durability a statement of defiance in our fast-paced, divisive world.

And its story begins once upon a time.

Children's Fairyland was the vision of Arthur Navlet, a retired owner of Oakland's largest nursery. On a visit to the Belle Isle Aquarium in Detroit, Navlet and his wife were smitten by the park's children zoo, which, as detailed in the book "Creating a Fairyland" by Randal J. Metz, a former Fairyland art director who currently leads the park's puppet program, exhibited the animals amid fairy tale-like enclosures. Navlet had an idea for a fanciful park in Oakland, and took the concept to the Lake Merritt Breakfast Club, a long-standing civic-focused group dedicated to preserving and sustaining Lakeside Park.

With the organization, and soon the city, behind him, Navlet tapped painter and sculptor William Russell Everitt to create the Fairyland look. It wasn't always a smooth partnership. Everitt, for instance, created a model of an English cottage that Navlet thought was a bit too realistic. Everitt, writes Metz, took a baseball bat to the tiny sculpture and stormed out of the room. But he didn't quit the project, and future designs were full of oblong shapes, zig-zagging roofs and slanted walls, designs that were playful but also a nonsensical view of reality.

And thus the Fairyland-style was established. Copy-cats soon followed around the country. In California alone, Fairyland helped inspire the likes of Fairytale Town in Sacramento and Fresno's Storyland. Fairyland, meanwhile, kept innovating.

"They started adding puppetry and magic and all these things kids absolutely loved," says Metz. "That started here at Fairyland. There was no other place that was doing that at the moment. After Fairyland opened in 1950, Life magazine did a big full-color spread, and then all over the United States people wanted to build Fairylands."

While Fairyland started a national trend, perhaps the most famous person to visit the park was Disney, who, says Metz, arrived at Fairyland on Easter Sunday in 1954, a year before Disneyland opened in July 1955. While the Walt Disney Family Museum and other Disney historians say there is no official record of Disney visiting the park, local newspapers of the era documented his appearance and many, including Metz, take it as fact that Disney spent an afternoon at Fairyland.

Metz writes in his book that Disney was particularly taken with Fairyland's mini post office, which allowed children to send letters straight from the park. Disneyland to this day has mailboxes in the park. Many draw a comparison to Fairyland's Willie the Whale and Disneyland's Monstro at the start of the Storybook Land Canal Boats, as both aim to swallow guests. The parks also share a love of garden-strewn pathways and an emphasis on breaking up environments with trees, mixing fantasy and nature to create a calming, safe-feeling environment. And Disney, of course, hired Fairyland's director Dorothy Manes to work on Disneyland.

"She was one of the few women in administrative leadership," says Cindy Mediavilla, a retired lecturer from UCLA's department of information studies and author of the book, "The Women Who Made Early Disneyland."

To Mediavilla, she is an overlooked Disneyland personality, working to set up tour school groups, help define children's activities and be an advocate for Disneyland's overly congenial hospitality. "She was credited with coming up with response to people who come up and say, 'We love Disneyland. Thank you so much,'" says Mediavilla. "She was credited with coming up with the phrase, 'It's been my pleasure.'"

She also helped maintain Disney's direct line to Fairyland, as Disney in 1957 would once again poach from Fairyland, this time puppeteer Bob Mills to run Disneyland's budding marionette program. Fairyland's importance in the area of the puppet arts would be hard to overstate. Celebrities in the space, such as Frank Oz, apprenticed at Fairyland, and Metz continues to run multiple shows per day, both revivals and original creations.

Metz's workshop is directly behind Fairyland's puppet stage, and it's a mini marionette museum, filled with books, pictures and, of course, puppets. Behind his desk hangs a Pinocchio puppet he made for the Walt Disney Co., and retired puppets from Highland Park's Bob Baker Marionette Theater can also be found in Metz's nook. It's a treasure trove, as intermixed with Fairyland's puppets will be those from Walt Disney World's Epcot, such as a fiery red Pantalone from the theme park's Italy pavilion.

"Children's Fairyland, for a lot of puppet theaters, including Bob Baker Marionette Theater, is really the one that we look to," says Winona Bechtle, Bob Baker's director of partnerships.

"How do you build out a space and experience around a puppet show?" Bechtle continues. "Of course, they're different than us, as they have the infrastructure of the amusement park around them, but it's a full-scale immersive experience that takes you beyond a small stage in a church or a community theater. When you're at Fairyland, there's a pomp and circumstance to entering the park, approaching the theater and taking a seat. Us, as puppeteers at Bob Baker Marionette Theater, continue to remain inspired by it."

Not all of Fairyland's innovations stuck. In its early days, the park hoped to establish a "pet lending library," and briefly advertised that guests could borrow rats, guinea pigs, lizards, snakes, foxes and more for a two-week period. It's safe to say it didn't get off the ground, although Fairyland today does house donkeys, goats, chickens and bearded dragons, among other animals, for children to meet.

And yet Fairyland's magic keys, introduced in 1958, would inspire not just other parks but museums and zoos around the country. The conceit sounds simple today: Kids are given a small plastic key, which they insert in a box near an installation and then are regaled with music and a short nursery rhyme or folktale. It was the brainchild of Bay Area television host Bruce Sedley, who also fashioned himself as an amateur inventor.

"That's the icon of Fairyland," says artist Jeff Hull, an Oakland native who once acted at Fairyland as a child performer and has created numerous immersive art projects, including "The Cortège" last fall in L.A.

"You put the magic key in these boxes that look like storybooks and now you're hearing an audio track that corresponds to an installation? That in itself is immersive art," says Hull. "That's storytelling. That's an installation as performance. That's the recipe for what so many people have continued to do and expand on."

To now walk among Fairyland is to feel as if an arm is being extended, an invitation to play, to be silly and to wonder. Children's Fairyland is full of hand-painted delights. Stroll a path and look down and spy some smiling sunflowers hidden in the bushes. There are fun house mirrors, a whimsical train, a mechanical Geppetto waving in a workshop and a cat ready to set sail atop the mast of a ship.

There's even a mini chapel – yes, a chapel – complete with stained glass windows initially designed by children, for those who need a meditative break from running the grounds. A vintage Ferris wheel, themed to "Anansi's Magic Web," is an opportunity to rediscover the folktale via the attraction's netting-like design.

Maintenance is a large expense for the park, as most sets need to be repainted yearly due to a combination of environmental and hands-on wear, but the park is also vibrant and in conversation with nature. The striking red-and-bronze sculpture of the smiling Ching Lung the Happy Dragon, for instance, circles around and through a towering tree.

"We believe very strongly in 'kiddie tech,'" says Metz. "We wanted everything to be hands-on. When children are excited about a set at Fairyland, we try to let them imagine they are in it. Henceforth Alice in Wonderland's tunnel, and going through the cards and pretending you're one of Alice's people."

Carissa Baker, a Los Angeles native who is now an assistant professor of theme park and attraction management at the University of Central Florida, says that Fairyland created its own stamp on children's architecture and fairy-tale imagery. "Now, we look at the elaborate spaces of theme parks, and we have all these elaborate forms of fantasy environments," Baker says. "But I kind of see the seed of these fantasy environments in a place like Children's Fairyland."

Miller has been overseeing Fairyland for about five years, and she talks of setting the tone for the park's next seven decades. First, she's been working on expanding the park's access. Those, for instance, who receive any sort of financial assistance can visit the park for $5 per person, a program started in 2023 that now serves close to 20,000 people. Next up is building structures to house the park's eight-person maintenance team to better manage repairs and upkeep.

Broadening Fairyland's story content is also a goal. Later this year, Fairyland will debut a puppet program inspired by Native American folklore as Metz and Miller seek to continue to diversify Fairyland's offerings.

"There's people whose stories are not being told in the park," says Miller. "Most of the stories told here are Northern European in nature. So it's really my job to unpack some of that with staff and figure out how to create more access."

And long-term, Miller would love to add some fresh fairy tale installations. That would require successful fundraising endeavors, but Miller stresses any future additions would be in line with what already exists, meaning a focus on imaginative play rather than "digital expression."

Old fashioned, yet inventive and timeless. That's the Children's Fairyland way.

Dragan Jovanovic / Dreamstime / TNS